

# **BHAKTIYOGA: Where bhakti and yoga meet, do they merge?**

Sandra Klemmer (December 2022)

## **Introduction**

In modern spiritual discourse, we often hear the term “bhaktiyoga” (or hyphenated, “bhakti-yoga”), but where does this compound come from and what exactly does it mean? It has become so common that we might not even consider how the meaning might relate to (or differ from) simple, “bhakti.”

There is indeed historical precedent in Sanskrit texts, particularly in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, for bhaktiyoga as a compound term and ontological concept. The *Bhagavadgītā* is generally accepted as a text on bhaktiyoga, though this term appears only once in its pages. Bhakti as devotion certainly has a role in the *Yogasūtra of Patañjali*, though it is never explicitly named. There is no doubt that the histories and practices of bhakti and yoga are woven together. But the question remains: where bhakti and yoga meet, do they actually merge?

Is it that we find bhakti that includes some yoga (bhakti-yoga) and yoga that includes some bhakti (yoga-bhakti, so-to-speak), or does the independent compound “bhaktiyoga” represent something ontologically distinct? Could popularized usage in modern mainstream spiritual circles obscure an historically accurate understanding? Lastly, is bhakti synonymous with bhaktiyoga?

The inspiration for this topic was twofold. Initially, I was bewildered by the work of Patten Burchett, exploring the complex relationship between yoga and bhakti in North India. Then, in a podcast interview by Seth Powell with Edwin Bryant (2022), Seth posed the question: “today in modern bhakti-yoga milieus sometimes the words bhakti and bhaktiyoga are used synonymously, and I just wonder if there were distinctions within the texts themselves?” Bryant replied his impression is they are synonymous, with no distinction specified in the texts. This left me wanting to explore further.

Here, to approach this question I will trace the history, meaning, implications, and usage of the compound “bhaktiyoga” (which to my knowledge has not been directly addressed), and I will extend the timeline of consideration into modern day to hypothesize how historical contexts may have shaped our trends in current usage and understanding. I will outline definitions of yoga and bhakti from various perspectives and timepoints and will share scholars’ opinions on the relationship between bhakti and yoga over time to gain insight on where they are distinct and where they overlap - or even integrate. In other words, who is the yogi, who is the bhakta, and who might be the bhaktiyogi? I will also share search results quantifying the occurrence of the “bhaktiyoga” in key Sanskrit texts.

In his book, *A Genealogy of Devotion* (2019), Patten Burchett explores the nuances and evolution of bhakti religiosity in North India between the fifteenth and eighteenth century (spanning Sultanate and Mughal India), focusing on its intersection with yoga – in his words, “*bhakti*’s changing, but always constitutive, historical relationships with yoga, tantra, and asceticism” (Burchett 2019, 20). This is imperative to insight on the term, bhaktiyoga. He delineates where yogic forms of religiosity have been “appropriated and adapted” into bhakti, as well as “marginalized and stigmatized” by bhakti. “Our modern-day understanding of ‘bhakti’ needs to include bhakti that is practiced together with – or in the framework of – yoga” (Burchett 2019, 130). Burchett’s research provides much of the context for this paper, supported by many other scholars.

Amongst modern bhaktas, I will propose there is a return to an attitude of embrace towards the term “bhaktiyoga” and identification as a “bhaktiyogi” – a reclaiming of sorts, after an era in history in which

bhakti sought distance from association with “yoga” (despite the reality that yoga and bhakti remained intertwined). Heidi Pauwels clearly cautions, “it is becoming clear that religious identities that have hardened in modern times cannot be projected back unproblematically into the past” (2010, 509). We need to understand where we are currently positioned and how are we looking back.

Part of the challenge of exploring “bhaktiyoga” as a category is that the components “bhakti” and “yoga” are both dynamic, broad, and in some ways ontologically elusive. Assigned religious categories occur retrospectively and are porous. Burchett shares some thoughts: “the conceptual categories that are our most important tools in the scholarly enterprise of understanding and explaining are also our most dangerous obstacles. ... For anyone trying to understand South Asian history and religion, there is no question that Bhakti, Tantra, and Yoga are ‘historiographically over- burdened’ conceptual terms that can obscure more than they reveal” (2019, 22). And, according to Frazier (2013, 101), “Above all, the mystery of bhakti has led scholars to question the very ontology of religious history... Is [bhakti] a category of identity, an attitude to god, a cultural grammar of practice, or a particularly intense and vital tone of religious life? The definition, history, and even the very reification of ‘bhakti’ are all still in the process of being renegotiated.” This adds one last question to this discussion: given the known and significant limitations of categorical terminology within Indic religiosity (including “bhakti” and “yoga”), how much should we read into a bhaktiyoga as a category – how much meaning should we impose onto the term?

## A Brief Historical Overview

Beginning with a historical overview, we can gain insight into the relationship of bhakti to yoga, and thus the term “bhaktiyoga.” First, some key points in India’s history for the purposes of this paper: the Tantric Age is located within the early medieval period of the seventh to the thirteenth century; the Delhi Sultanate period spanned the thirteenth to sixteenth century; and the Mughal dynasty ruled from approximately the sixteenth to eighteenth century. Prior to roughly the sixteenth century, bhakti existed alongside of asceticism, tantra, and yoga – often directly engaged (Burchett 2019). The end of the Tantric Age in roughly the thirteenth century brought renewed ascetic enthusiasm and yogic sensibility – this was the atmospheric precursor to the North India bhakti movement, thus bhakti and yoga had ample reason to interact.

The sixteenth century marked an inflection point in the perceptions and positions of bhakti relative to yoga. Almost like an eddy in the stream of history, things swirled with momentum, and emerged at different angles. In the sixteenth century North India, what Burchett refers to as “a new and distinctive bhakti sensibility” emerged, with influence from Persian culture and Sufism. Bhakti values permeated the religious landscape. This “imagined community” was “a transregional, transsectarian bhakti sensibility” marked by a focus on personal devotion to the Divine, with shared morals and values. With this came the expansion of Vaiṣṇava bhakti traditions accessible to all, and more emphasis on devotion to the Divine, in place of previously dominant themes of Indic religiosity like knowledge, ritual, or the practices of yoga or asceticism (Burchett 2019).

But, as this “new bhakti sensibility” grew, it needed to define its identity, which it did via “othering” yogis (of many ilk). In the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, subtle distinctions emerged, and by the eighteenth century, perceived and articulated distinctions intensified between bhakti versus the yogis, ascetics and especially *tantrikās* (at times expressed in hagiography and poetry as practically comedic scathing ancient insults (Burchett 2019; Pauwels 2010). In other words, there was a move away from an inclusivist *bhakti* closely involved with tantric and yogic practices, toward an increasingly boundaried

*bhakti* that defined itself by demeaning, minimizing, or opposing tantra, yoga, and ascetic religiosity (Burchett 2019, 156).

Of note, beginning in the twentieth-century term “the bhakti movement” has been used to describe the expansion of bhakti religiosity and enthusiasm occurring in South India between the sixth and ninth centuries. However, as Burchett (2019) and Hawley (2015) among others have pointed out, use of the term is quite misleading as it overlooks the variety of forms and roles that bhakti took on geographically and historically – such as, the sixteenth-century expansion of bhakti devotional traditions in North India as mentioned. Thinking about “bhaktis” (plural) and “movements” (plural) may better encapsulate its multiplicity. Hawley (2015) even wonders “whether the bhakti movement is to be understood as a subset of Hindu religiosity and history, or as something that transcends its boundaries.”

Parallel to yoga, clearly “what bhakti is” has always been in motion, with some durable threads. In line with Burchett, I will use the pre-sixteenth century to understand the overlap between bhakti and yoga (a time of inclusivity); peri-sixteenth century to explore the shift, when opinions were actively revised; and sixteenth to eighteenth century to consider distinction between bhakti and yoga, when bhakti expressed outright opposition to yogis. To emphasize and complicate matters, it was the attitudes and perceptions changing; in reality, the practices often remained quite blended. This begins to add some texture to the discussion of “bhaktiyoga” which relies on both a generalizable and nuanced understanding of bhakti in relationship to yoga across time. Like a lovers’ quarrel in human relationships, we cannot misinterpret the *expression* of criticism or conflict meaning that bhakti is rejecting yoga, they in fact remained intimately bound.

### **What is Yoga?**

What do we mean by “yoga?” Yoga and bhakti both have a spectrum of meanings depending on the religious context, and social and historical position, and both terms have been well painted and excavated by many scholars, so I will aim to summarize and to highlight relevant points regarding what does yoga mean, how is it practiced, and who is a yogi.

The Sanskrit word “*yoga*” comes from the root √*yuj-*, which has many meanings but most commonly “to harness or control,” “to yoke, to concentrate, or “to join.” To paraphrase Burchett, broadly speaking, yoga is to link (yoke) a lower-order consciousness to a higher-order consciousness for some purpose (Burchett 2019, 172). This aligns with the first known description of yoga, in the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* (c. third century), that when the sense and faculties of the mind are linked to pure consciousness, this is yoga. Rooted in Sāṅkhya, Yoga was systematized in the *Yogasūtra of Patañjali*, practiced as asceticism, and much later became one of the six orthodox schools of Hinduism (Classical Yoga). In her ethnographic research Daniela Bevilacqua (2017) shares that “*sādhus* claim it cannot be described by words or understood by someone who is not on the path.”

To attend to what bhaktiyoga might mean and whether bhakti could be “a yoga,” we need to define the concepts and practices of yoga. Geoffrey Samuel (2008) put forward that Yoga consists of “disciplined and systematic techniques for the training and control of the human mind-body complex, which are also understood as techniques for the reshaping of human consciousness towards some kind of higher goal.” Very similarly, Sarbacker (2020) concludes that “In its primary sense, yoga is a set or a system of techniques of mind-body discipline, rooted in Indian religion and philosophy, that aims to transform a practitioner into a more perfect being so as to (1) make them more powerful and/or to (2) facilitate

liberation from worldly affliction.” Both scholars’ descriptions avoid specifying the end goal; the approach is emphasized.

However –most relevantly – Sarbacker (2020) goes on: “In its secondary sense, yoga refers to specific modes and goals of practice, and thus may be qualified by compounding the term with particular categorical designations of technique.” He gives examples of bhaktiyoga, mantrayoga, and layayoga. Further designating yoga by creating such compounds duly represents “the universality of Indian notions of a goal-oriented spiritual discipline found throughout the range of traditions of Yoga, while respecting the fact that the nature of the discipline and the goals of practice in yoga may differ significantly depending on the philosophical, sectarian, or nonsectarian concepts in which they have been developed practiced.”

Burchett seems to echo this spacious perspective on yoga: “I conceive yoga as an assortment of methods of meditation and mind-body asceticism—technologies for ‘harnessing’ oneself—intended to bring about spiritual realization (liberation) or extraordinary power. In understanding yoga in this way—as psychosomatic disciplines designed to transform consciousness and realize the full potentials inherent in the human mind and body—we see that, historically, yoga has been a diffuse set of different techniques, not confined to any particular sectarian affiliation or social form, that could be appropriated and practiced independently of any ideological allegiances” (Burchett 2019, 173). He goes on with examples that both Nāths (loosely ascetics) and Rāmānandīs (loosely bhaktas) incorporated aspects of yoga.

Admitting the risks of drastic oversimplification, Burchett subdivides yoga into three “streams” of practice: (1) ascetic (*tapasvi*) yoga, (2) meditational yoga, and (3) tantric yoga – which while in some ways distinct, were never entirely separate and often overlapped (Burchett 2019, 173). In its earliest history, yoga was primarily associated with practices of *tapas* (the transformative power of heat born from disciplined effort). Thus, austerities like renunciation of the everyday world, adherence to moral conduct, controlling the body and breath, regulation of the senses, and meditation characterize the ascetic (*tapasvi*) yoga.

The *Yogasūtra of Patañjali* emphasized meditation – discipline of the mind – as the means to liberation into pure consciousness (*samādhi*) and to gain direct perception of reality (Burchett 2019, 175-176). The practices of which are outlined in its eight-fold path: moral restraints (*yama*), inner observances (*niyama*, including *Īśvaraḥṛāṇidhāna*, or devotion to the Divine), seated posture *āsana*, breath control (*prāṇāyāma*), restraint of the senses (*pratyāhāra*), fixation of the mind (*dhāraṇā*), meditation (*dhyāna*), and complete absorption, i.e., the state of liberation (*samādhi*). The path to the highest goal – for Patañjali - is through the disciplining, concentrating, and stilling the mind. In his commentary on the *Yogasūtra*, Swami Hariharananda (1960) states that yoga achieve its goal of spiritual liberation “through practice of sturdy self-discipline, study of religious scriptures, and repetition of Mantras and complete devotion to God.”

In the context of the *Yogasūtra* Gerald Larson favors that the term “yoga” denotes concentration, placing the ultimate emphasis of yoga on “disciplined meditation,” whereas David Gordon White feels this is an overemphasis, i.e., that what defines yoga includes meditation, but is broader than meditation (Burchett 2019, 185).

For tantric yogis, the path to liberation is by becoming Divine (and thus attaining Divine power), with practices outlined in its six-fold yogic path that emphasizes practices of mantra, visualization, manipulating the subtle body, layayoga (the yoga of dissolving the mind into higher consciousness), and in the thirteenth century began to incorporate more bodily practices (Haṭhayoga). The tantric system

conceives of the Universe as Divine energy and uses practices to channel that power (Burchett 2019) Where the bhakta strives to serve and to love the Divine, the tantric yogi aims to become Divine.

For all yogic practitioners, successful practice involved naturally arising powers (*siddhis, vibhūṭis, balas*), but the attitude toward them has varied: in the meditational yoga stream, powers were typically viewed as obstacles and distractions, whereas in tantric yoga achieving Divine powers was often the goal. This will become a point of much contention and judgment between the early modern “new” bhakti traditions and tantric yogis (Burchett 2019).

With a broad definition established - a range of techniques applied towards a higher purpose through overlapping orientations or streams of practice - when it comes to understanding the component terms of “bhaktiyoga” or a “bhaktiyogi,” who even is a “yogi?” Trends in use of the “yogi” label through history are very interesting, and hinge on variable public perceptions and religious zeitgeist.

Early Rāmānandī ascetic practitioners of yoga “never actually used the term yogi explicitly, though they seemed to clearly describe themselves with the qualities of yogis.” (Burchett 2019, 187). At times, the term yogi referred to specific communities of ascetics (distinct from Rāmānandī); at times it specifically points to Nāths ascetics; and yet in other situations Rāmānandī and Daśānāmī were denoted as yogis. What do we make of this confusion? In part, when “yogi” was associated with the Nāths (tantric yogis), it took on a negative connotation in general religious perception. Thus, the Rāmānandīs (“yoga-practicing bhakti ascetics”) began to distance themselves from wearing the label of yogi - and indeed many practitioners of yoga sidestepped the label yogi (Burchett 187). This is critical: by the sixteenth century, there was significant circumstantial motivation for bhaktas to distance themselves from the label yogi. In early modern North India, practitioners who prioritized devotional practices generally identified as “bhaktas,” even though yoga may well have been embedded in their path.

“The larger point is that if we comb the records of history for figures called yogis, we undoubtedly will miss out on a great many ‘practitioners of yoga’” (Burchett 2019, 187). Has a stream of what we could call “bhaktiyogis” been overlooked due to some of this obscurity? We can understand that despite what was happening in religious practice, a practitioner may or may not choose to identify a certain way depending on public perception and social mores. It seems clear, that as the “new bhakti sensibility” came into favor – and tantric yoga fell from grace - those adhering to practices that might objectively be called “bhakti-yoga,” would have avoided that term in favor of simply “bhakta.”

According to Burchett: “Clearly, there is a great deal of confusion surrounding the term “yogi” itself, which has not had a historically consistent meaning or referent and has been used rather loosely to refer to individuals whose yogic practices and religious outlooks differed considerably. While it might seem that a yogi is quite simply one who practices yoga, what is considered to constitute “yoga,” and to what degree that yoga is central in the religiosity of any given yogi, varies greatly. Depending on the period, region, and specific community in which the term is being used, what is meant by the label yogi may be something quite different, and scholars writing about yoga and yogi must remain cognizant of these differences” (Burchett 2019, 187).

As yogis (particularly ascetic yogis) were symbols of great respect (despite negative depictions by bhakti at times), Sufi-inflected bhakti poetry like that of Sūrdās and Mīrābāī, co-opt ed the social power of yogis by claiming that the “true *yogi*” is the one sincerely devoted to the Divine (Burchett 2019, 286). This makes one wonder if linking the term “yoga” to “bhakti” (i.e., bhaktiyoga) could have enhanced bhakti’s currency.

## What is Bhakti?

We have discussed one half of the compound “bhaktiyoga,” so what then does “bhakti” mean? We can get insight from its etymology, practices, and sociocultural context, but interpreting bhakti is at least as complex and murky as yoga. Bhakti encompasses a lot of religious landscape and is too often translated simply as “devotion” which is problematic due to Protestant Christian connotations.

The Sanskrit root  $\sqrt{bhaj}$  has many meanings, including “to enjoy,” “to experience,” “to serve,” “to divide something into component parts,” “to love,” “to partake,” etc. (Monier-Williams 1899). Most relevant to this discussion it connotes relationship, sharing, participation, devotion - as Jessica Frazier (2015) describes “the relation of a part or attribute to something larger.” The relationship is between a subject (bhakta) and some divine Other, with emphasis on active emotional engagement, participation, community, and reciprocity. It generally denotes both the means (path) and the goal. Like yoga, the goal of bhakti is also moksha – but for bhaktas liberation is communion with the Divine or “realization of transcendent beauty” (Carman 2005, 587). Where the aims in yoga are world-transcending, bhakti is world-affirming.

Though bhakti of South India during the sixth to ninth centuries was intensely emotional (such as among the *Ālvārs*), before the twelfth century the term “bhakti” generally expressed a broader sentiment - of reverence, service, faith, and connection (“bhakti for guru” in Śaiva tantra). Premodern India did not see *bhakti* as a restricted category of religiosity or a distinct theology. But when Sufism met bhakti in the spiritual petri dish of early modern North India, it bumped the needle towards a bhakti of love, emotional expression, and devotion – what Burchett (2019) calls the “new distinctive bhakti sensibility.” And at least initially, the term *bhakta* indicated one having a participatory relationship with Divinity, though “in no way precluded, and often actually called for, renunciation, asceticism, yoga, or tantric ritual technique” (Burchett 2019, 156).

Bryant emphasizes that bhakti is a verbal noun, i.e., that there is a doing of bhakti that hinges on an active loving relationship (reciprocity) – free from ego - between a practitioner and the Divine (or, in later bhakti, between practitioner and guru, where guru is seen as a Divine avatar). There is consensus from within the traditions and from academia that emotion cultivated via bhakti can include every possible form of love, and that this depends upon embodiment (“bhakti needs bodies,” says Christian Novetzke) (Burchett 2019). Frazier (2015) poses that bhakti emotion is not a state of mind but is contact with “a major force in the universe.” Carman (2005, 856) shares an enjoyable description that bhakti is a “divine-human relationship as experienced from the human side” and he stops just short of declaring “love” a more fitting word to translate bhakti as opposed to “devotion” (his hesitancy with devotion being that it lacks reciprocity).

According to Constantina Rhodes Bailly, within the Śiva tradition of Utpaladeva this reciprocity exists as devotion on the part of the bhakta and grace (*anugraha*) bestowed by Divinity (in this case, Śiva). “In the state of absolute realization, one perceives the process of devotion and grace as two aspects of one divine process” (Rhodes Bailly 1987, 16).

Burchett would like to see more yogic influence included in an understanding of bhakti: “Scholarly descriptions of bhakti draw on a vocabulary of devotion that ranges widely from veneration, worship, and submission to passionate emotion, participation, and performance to embodiment, circulation, and memory. Nevertheless, too rarely does the spectrum of this vocabulary include words that would reveal any yogic, ascetic, or tantric dimensions of bhakti. ... for most of Indian history the practices of bhakti,

yoga, tantra, and asceticism have been tightly intertwined” (Burchett 2019, 152). This could be a vote in favor of increasing the use of the term “bhaktiyoga” in academic discourse.

In Sultanate and Mughal India, bhakti practices focused on spiritual fellowship (*satsang*), song (*kirtan*, *bajan*), loving relationship with the Divine, and remembrance of the Divine (via meditation, recitation, chant, song, stories, and rituals) (Burchett 2019, 2). According to Carman, here in the practices “there is a strong difference in emphasis between devotional and ascetic paths, for the distinctive rituals of bhaktas are generally not reserved for the few qualified initiates, but open to all...humility is a necessary qualification for receiving the Lord’s grace” (Carman 2005, 858).

### **What Do Scholars Say About the Complexity of Describing Bhakti?**

As with yoga, many scholars have concluded that etymology does little to inform us on bhakti in practice. And, while categorical terminology enables discussion, it also oversimplifies and misrepresents religiosity. Bhakti has been influenced by and interactive with history, geography, and other religions like Hinduism, Sufism, Jainism, Buddhism (e.g., Pure Land Buddhism has bhakti at its core) (Burchett 2019; Carman 2005). It is “a highly complex multiform cultural category” according to John E. Cort (2002), and interpretation has been heavily skewed by the Protestant influences of early scholars and biases of what are predominantly Western scholars (i.e., that bhakti refers only to Kṛṣṇa worship or Vaiṣṇavism) (Sharma 1987; Burchett 2019).

Dissecting the living organism of bhakti might be as challenging as dividing up water in the global ocean. Krishna Sharma (1987) is very direct that bhakti cannot be understood as a “uniform set of ideas or beliefs” or as having with any common ideology, and Jon Keune cautions that bhakti has “a deceptive aura of familiarity” (Burchett 2019). It seems almost as though as soon as we try to pick it up, it dissolves in our hands. Frazier (2015) even characterizes bhakti by this feature, stating that “the unravelling of bhakti into its constituent strands does not make it disappear; it merely reveals some of the intellectual and cultural threads that constitute it.”

What constituents *can* we point to as bhakti? Surveying scholars’ approaches collectively might start to yield the dimensionality it deserves – looking through lenses of devotional attributes, theology, embodiment, poetry and song, emotion, and its relationship to social reform and community.

Karen Pechilis and Barbara Holdredge - among others - assign devotional participation, experience, and embodied engagement with the Divine as being the essence of bhakti. “Academic discussions of bhakti that focus on the image of God, including monotheism and *nirguṇa* and *sagūṇa*, and those that focus on social movements, including reform, revolution, and revival, tend to obstruct scholarly recognition of the pattern of concern with embodiment common to bhakti’s proponents and interpreters,” says Karen Pechilis (Burchett 2019, 5). Burchett echoes that social impact of bhakti is “accomplished in the cultivation of feeling – the transmission of affect – far more than conveying of theology and ideology” (Burchett 2019, 18). In the realm of experience and emotion, academic language and static constructs may simply be inadequate to describe bhakti and one can understand why it is often communicated through poetry, song and dance. As bhakti is particularly dependent on emotion, Sara Ahmed and Burchett remind us emotions are not static – they are associated with energy and play out within the social realm (Burchett 2019, 17).

For John Stratton Hawley (2015), heartfelt connectedness is the currency of bhakti which lives as “a complex network of networks” between people, place, language, poetry, emotion, and society. Similarly, John Cort explains, “Bhakti is both something that one does and an attitude that can suffuse

all of one's actions. Bhakti can range from sober respect and veneration that upholds socioreligious hierarchies and distinctions to fervent emotional enthusiasm that breaks down all such hierarchies and distinctions in a radical soteriological egalitarianism. Bhakti is not one single thing" (Burchett 2019, 7).

Christian Novetzke brings in a slightly different perspective, that bhakti should not be identified as personal devotion, nor as a social movement, rather as an embodied phenomenon arising between personal and social – the social entities (publics) formed when “ideas, materials, and memories circulate among individuals” (Burchett 2019, 6). Where yogic frameworks of practice are autonomous (personal, individual) and bhakti frameworks tend to acknowledge community and the collective, could the term bhaktiyoga map onto at Novetzke's notion at the intersection?

Burchett views bhakti as a sensibility – not a theology, ideology, or intrinsic qualities– with its spread accomplished via affect, feeling. Thus, “considering bhakti's varying contextually rooted meanings it may be especially productive to approach the term *relationally*” to other concepts and traditions (Burchett 2019, 8). Perhaps similarly, Rhodes Bailly suggests that grace is the definable aspect of bhakti: “Devotion is dynamic, ever-seeking, ever-changing, while at the same time complemented by the steady illumination that is grace” (1987, 18).

Scholars converge around themes of bhakti being centered on experience and affect, lacking uniform practices, that it exists in plurality and in relationship to its surroundings.

### **Where Do Bhakti and Yoga Overlap?**

To summarize thus far, throughout Classical and medieval India, bhakti (as devotion) appeared as an element of religious life across many traditions, was not a singular practice, and there was no conflict or contradiction between bhakti and yoga. In fact, bhakti texts incorporated asceticism, tantric ritual and yoga, substantiating a definite and positive connection between bhakti and yoga. According to Burchett, prior to the fifteenth to sixteenth centuries, “historically speaking, [lines of separation] simply did not exist between bhakti and other ‘categories’ of Indic religiosity” (Burchett 2019, 8). To provide more context for the compound “bhaktiyoga,” I will offer some further background on where bhakti and yoga align, intersect, and overlap.

From the perspective of the traditions themselves, texts yield valuable insight. Going back to early evidence, Carman suggests there are traces of bhakti in several of the classical Upanisads (Carman 2005). Third century Sanskrit literature of Vaiṣṇava traditions stressed asceticism and yoga as being necessary elements within devotion. As mentioned, devotion (*Īśvarapraṇidhāna*) was a specific component of the *Yogasūtra* (dated to the fourth century) and its eight-limbed yoga. Sarbacker (2020) notes meditation (*dhyāna*) is often conceptualized as an indispensable part of the path to liberation by both Yoga and bhakti (among other traditions). While there are some differing opinions, it seems to be a general consensus among scholars and practitioners that the *Bhagavadgītā* (c. second century) presents bhakti as a type of yoga, i.e., harnessing the senses, mental faculties, and consciousness to the Divine by disciplined meditation (*dhyāna*) and dispassion (*vairāgya*). And, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* delineates practices and concepts of renunciation, tantric worship, and yoga as being necessary for the more superior cultivation of bhakti (Burchett 2019, 153). I will explore some of these texts in more detail later.

By the twelfth century bhakti was most alive within tantric frameworks, and later by the sixteenth century when bhakti traditions took popularity tantra remained embedded. Over time, there was “bhakti in tantra and tantra in bhakti” (Bryant 2020, 36). Prior to the sixteenth century, engaging in bhakti often implicated renunciation, asceticism, yoga, or tantric ritual techniques as part of the

practice. Devotion was generally key to the tantric goals of identifying with, merging with the energy of, and attaining the power of the Divine. André Padoux highlights that “Tantric texts often say that a given practice or rite is to be performed with devotion (*bhaktiyā*)” (Burchett 2019, 36), and other scholars echo the strong sentiment of devotion, or *bhakti*, among tantric yogis. In the twelfth century, beginning with Rāmānuja, “Vaiṣṇava Vedāntas” held knowledge- (*jñāna*) and *bhakti*-driven forms of meditational yoga in close association (Burchett 2019, 179). Keep in mind, the term *bhakti* had a slightly different (more general) meaning at this time and we need accommodate such fluidity.

The Rāmānandī sampradāya, is a Vaiṣṇava order that gained prominence with the “new distinct *bhakti* sensibility” in the sixteenth century. The Rāmānandī was made of an array of practitioners, but included *bhakti* ascetics practicing liberation-oriented, *tapasvi*- and *tantra*- rooted yoga during the sixteenth through eighteenth century. They were what Burchett refers to as yoga-practicing *bhakti* ascetics (2019, 310) and reflect the tight weave of devotion, yoga, tantra, and asceticism in classical and early modern India. With time, two clearer subdivisions emerged within the Rāmānandī *bhaktas*: one more *tapas*-, ascetic- and yoga-oriented (*tyāgīs*) and the other more devotional (Rasiks). This reconfiguration becomes relevant as attitudes later start to shift.

In an interesting story from Bevilacqua’s work (2017), a Rāmānujī guru assigned one Rāmānujī *sādhū bhakti sādhanā* instead of the *dhyāna yoga sādhanā* characteristic to that group. She explains the teachings are offered to disciples at the discretion of guru, and in this case “his guru at the time of initiation realized *bhajan* and *nām jap* (the repetition of God’s name) were more likely than Yoga to bring him success on the religious path.” This speaks to the weave of *bhakti* and yoga together at this time - each appreciated, and often in practice are blended.

Many have correlated repetition of the Divine name – a *bhakti* practice - with *japa* (or mantra meditation) – a yogic practice. There is no doubt in the similarity, though in his article “Bitten by a Snake” (2013) Burchett qualifies that *bhakti* also “radically reinterpreted” tantric mantra, and in the process diminishes all other mantras to being meaningless. A recurring story, for *bhaktas* mantra as utilized by tantric yogis (and the goals of them) were viewed/portrayed as being definitively inferior (Burchett 2013, 14).

In the work of the Gauḍīya Vaiṣṇava *bhakti* philosopher, Rūpa Goswāmī, *sevā* is one form of liberation and is equated with *bhakti* yoga. Frazier illuminates that in the context of Rūpa Goswāmī, *sevā* “is surely not only ritual service to the deity – rather it is a sort of yoga, a harnessing of oneself to a specific goal with complete focus and devotion.” (Frazier 2015) Beyond the scope of this project, it would be beneficial to delineate the overlap between the *Upadesamṛta* (Nectar of Instruction), a *bhakti* text by Rūpa Goswāmī and the *Haṭhapradīpikā* (a yogic text, by Svātmārāma). For example, in the respective descriptions of moral regulating principles, what supports success in yoga gets coopted into what supports success in *bhakti*.

Frazier does not hesitate to gesture towards the validity of the term “*bhaktiyoga*” and to take the stance that:

“...of course the dichotomisation of yogic dispassion and ascetic lifestyle from theistic devotion is ill-grounded; many contemporary Hindu renunciants are in fact *Śiva* *bhaktas*, and yoga as a discipline of controlling and harnessing the mental-physical self has come to be applied to all sorts of goals. In text too, the two traditions have a relationship of complementarity, and even of identity. If the yoga that we see in the *Yoga Sūtra* and Yoga Upaniṣads is above all the analysis, control, and harnessing of mental states, then certain

traditions of bhakti are a continuation of that project, providing a theory of the emotional modifications of the mind (and heart) in the bhakti rasas, as well as a practical method for controlling and cultivating emotion through the use of devotional arts, *sādhana* routines of an up-building character, and the inspiration of an exemplar present in the figure of the saint who lives constantly in the elevated state of absorption and one-pointed focus on the divine. Thus, Bhakti appears not as a competitor to yoga, but as its heir....” (Frazier 2015, 106)

In the relationship between compound components “bhakti” and “yoga,” Hanumān is noteworthy Divine iconographic bridge. Revered in both *bhakti* and *śakti* paradigms - as having an open heart and the ideal of selfless service and devotion to bhaktas, and as great self-realized ascetic with divine powers (*siddhis*) to *śaktas* - Hanumān is a bridge between bhakti and yoga (Burchett 2019)

In the mid-eighteenth century, the bhakti movement influenced *Śiva- Śakta* yogis, and thus emerged *Śakta bhakti* - even though many communities of devotional bhakti criticized *Śakta* for reasons discussed later (Burchett 2019, 260). Frazier makes an interesting insight: “the Kashmiri scholar Abhinavagupta provides a characterisation of the yogic, renunciatory realisation of *Śiva* as an emotion of *śānti* or ‘peace’, provoking us to wonder whether even the subjective experience of dispassionate calm and lucidity can also be a form of bhakti experience” (Frazier 2015, 107).

Timothy Dobe concludes that “devotional asceticism” is the norm – not exception - in the history of bhakti practice. And that “Haberman’s study of *bhakti sādhana*, the discipline and method of devotion, makes clear that bhakti cultivates and is cultivated by embodied practices and rigorous, bodily discipline – in other words, through asceticism.” (Dobe 2015)

### **Where Was Bhakti Critical of Yoga?**

Around the sixteenth century the relationship between bhakti and yoga evolved into something more complex. In early modern India a new bhakti sensibility developed, but so did a new yogic sensibility – one that became more democratized, streamlined, and moved away from complex rituals and metaphysical teachings of tantra. The thirteenth century marked the end of the Tantric Age, and though tantra persisted, in the new religious environment of the Sultanate period tantric practices were marginalized (Burchett 2020, 176). For historical color, the Rāmānandīs had defeated the Nāths (rooted in tantric yoga), as the Rāmānandīs grew they grouped into two orientations, essentially one rooted in *tapasvī* yoga and the other devotionally-focused bhaktas, and now public opinion of tantric yoga was souring. Devotional Bhaktas held a reputation of supremely moral in society, which came into conflict with certain aspects of tantric religiosity. Bhakti deemed yogis as pretentious, pointless, occult, amoral, sinister, and misguided for their austerities, complex rituals, and *siddhi*-oriented aims. Much of the attitudes and hierarchical thinking (e.g., bhakti positioning itself as superior to tantra; or at times leveraging the image of *tapasvī* yogis as symbols of respect) revolves around the deeper question of what is power, and how that changes. Is power that of the meditative ascetic *tapasvī* yogis? The magic-generating tantric yogis? Or the moral, devotional bhaktas?

Despite the reality that the “new distinctive bhakti sensibility” was woven from a web of devotion, yoga, tantra – with an initially porous, fluid, integrated and harmonious relationship between the various practices - as attitudes towards tantra and complex yoga shifted some bhaktas began to strengthen their identity by defining themselves as distinct from the tantric and ascetic yogis. While in practice, overlap between bhakti, yoga and tantra remained, “othering” to claim distinctions became the bhakta marketing technique (often relying on artificial caricatures and stereotypes of the Nāths and tantric yogīs more broadly). With this confluence of factors, what started as tension between bhaktas

and yogis ultimately gave way to flat out opposition, critique and near Shakespearian-level name-calling and mocking (Burchett 2019). The new bhakti sensibility rooted in “self-surrendering, loving devotion to God” developed its identity by positioning itself against “the self-asserting, power-focused perspective of tantric religiosity” (Burchett 2019, 3). Where practices were once comfortably woven together, they began to portray themselves as being more distinct.

According to Burchett, prior to the sixteenth century, there were no “fundamental dividing lines between the realms of bhakti and tantra, or bhakti and yoga” (Burchett 2019, 240). In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Vaishnava bhakti took aim at yogis and increasingly and intentionally separated itself from yogic association. It reinvented itself as more bounded and exclusive, versus inclusive. This was influenced and reinforced by figures like Agradās and his disciple Nābhādās who as described by Burchett “had a vision of bhakti as a more exclusionary spiritual path, as well as a distinctive ethical, emotional, and aesthetic sensibility uniting a vast religious community; it was a vision of bhakti that gave no significant place to yoga, *jñāna* (knowledge), *tapas* (asceticism), and tantric religiosity.” In favor of pure devotion, Agradās said, “*jñāna*, *yoga*, and *tapas* are as *rasa*-less [dull, useless] as a dried-up stem of sugarcane,” and “yoga, sacrifice, and asceticism achieve nothing” (Burchett 2019, 235).

Burchett (2013) shares examples of Indian Sufi and bhakti poetry around a theme that the *tāntrika* or *yogī* must admit their powers and magic fail to solve a problem (such as a poisonous snakebite), and that the solution is loving relationship with the Divine. In other words, that love for the Divine is far more powerful than yogic *siddhi*. One such example is a story by Ganeshdas which concludes, “*Tāntra* in the face of Rām bhakti, and a *tāntrika* in the face of a Rām-bhakta, had to bow down” (Burchett 2013, 10).

To emphasize, the irony is that portrayals of yogis, ascetics, and especially *tāntrikas* by Bhakti communities were not necessarily historically accurate, and behind the harsh propaganda yoga remained a component of devotional bhakti practice and life. There were even hints that tantric concepts of embodiment thriving in bhakti practice. According to Frazier, emotion of bhakti may function at the level of the subtle body enabling practitioners to connect and interact more freely with the Divine. And, when a deity makes “divine descent” into human form (i.e., an avatar) as a guru or manifests in human bodies temporarily through ritual, are these akin to tantric union with the Divine and divinization of the body. We have to be careful not to impose such a concept onto bhakti, though this likening of tantra to bhakti also seems worthy of merit in the realm of two intertwined yogic systems. (Frazier 2015; Holdredge 2015)

Kabīr, Tulsīdās, Raidās and Harirām Vyās are just some of the bhakti poets who worked with anti-*tāntrikas*, anti-*Śiva-Śakta* sentiments. Kabīr, fifteenth century Sufi-bhakti poet, found ample opportunity to diminish yogis in his work. For example:

Go naked if you want, put on animal skins. What does it matter till you see the inward Rām? /  
If the union yogis seek came from roaming around in the buff, every deer in the forest would  
be saved. / If shaving your head spelled spiritual success, heaven would be filled with sheep. /  
And brother, if holding back your seed earned you a place in paradise, eunuchs would be the  
first to arrive. / Kabir says: Listen brother, without the name of Rām, who has ever won the  
spirit’s prize? (Burchett 2019, 246)

And,

“People are so dumb. Their minds just can’t get the point. / The mind cannot see it’s tasting  
*māyā*’s fake flavor. / It just doesn’t happen; the truth never dawns. / *Tantras*, *mantras* and

medicines – fake one and all - / And only Kabir is left around to sing the name of Rām.”  
(Burchett 2019, 9)

Tulsīdās, a sixteenth century Rāmānandī Vaiṣṇava bhakti poet, repeatedly emphasizes how mantras, yoga, and asceticism are unnecessary and ineffective; all one needs is exclusively bhakti, loving devotion to the Divine. Though, for Tulsīdās it is slightly more nuanced than this: yogic practices may have worked well in prior ages, but in the Kali Age of dismal spiritual capacity they no longer have any relevance. He writes, “In this difficult age there is a great wealth of sins, there is no dharma, no wisdom, no *yoga*, no *jaṭ*. Abandoning faith in all these, the one who does bhakti to Ram alone is wise,” from the *Rāmcaritmānas* (Burchett 2019, pg 250). Promoting bhakti as the more accessible path to liberation during the *Kali Yuga* became a growing trend, which was later parroted by Krishnamacharya and Iyengar, figures in modern postural yoga.

Burchett points out that Kabīr and Tulsīdās both resided in the city of Banaras (Varanasi). He suggests that beyond sociocultural context, might geographic location have contributed to the anti-yogi rhetoric of bhaktas (Burchett 2019, 235)? Pauwels (2010) poses that perhaps the diatribes arose out of a political battle for royal sponsorship.

Raidās sings in praise of loving devotion, and gestures that yoga is prideful:

*Bhakti* is not like this, my brother. Whatever is done without the name of Rām, is all called delusion.

*Bhakti* is not suppression of the senses, not speaking of wisdom, not digging a cave in the forest. Not some joke, not the snares of desire. This is not *bhakti*.

*Bhakti* is not binding the senses, not practicing yoga, not eating less—all these practices are called *karma*.

*Bhakti* is not reducing the sleep, not practicing renunciation. These practices are not *bhakti*; they are the pride of the Vedas. (Burchett 2019)

A line by Harirām Vyās minces no words (referencing his own son): “Śāktas born from bhaktas must be someone else’s piss.” (Pauwels 2010)

Burchett summarizes, “The efforts of early modern North Indian bhakti reformers to construct new boundaries around bhakti—through especially a critique of tantric-yogic religiosity—had real and lasting impacts, helping to produce a distinctive, widely shared (but differentiated) bhakti emotional, aesthetic, and ethical sensibility; yet as I have demonstrated, they could never completely relegate tantra to the margins. ... Despite the efforts of various actors in Indian history to create boundaries between them, in the end bhakti, tantra, and yoga are not properly bounded entities” (2019, 308).

Burchett provides this summary of distinctions between yoga and bhakti (Burchett 2021). It would be interesting to add in a comparison of their relative practices for perspective on difference and overlap.

	Yoga (in Upanishads, Patanjali)	Bhakti
<b>Emotions</b>	Obstacles, distractions; quiet the mind, empty it of thoughts and emotions	The means to realize and experience God, should be cultivated to express devotion; spiritual (if purified)
<b>The Senses</b>	Dangerous; control the senses; sense objects are temptations; World is illusory	Affirmed, means to experience God in the world; devotional ritual involves all of them
<b>Spiritual Goal</b>	Merging into Absolute; dissolution of self; Pure Consciousness; isolation of Spirit ( <i>Purusha</i> ) from Matter ( <i>Prakriti</i> )	Communion w/ God; eternity in heaven of Supreme Deity (“Tasting Sugar, Not Being Sugar”; i.e., duality maintained)
<b>Method/Path to Goal</b>	Meditation & asceticism to attain liberating knowledge ( <i>jñāna</i> ); often an individual enterprise	Love; expressed through active participation in (usu. communal, shared) devotional practices

### Bhaktiyoga in The *Bhagavadgītā*

What can infer about bhaktiyoga from core Sanskrit texts like the *Yogasūtra*, *Bhagavadgītā*, or *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*? Perhaps surprisingly, the compound “bhaktiyoga” appears only once in the *Bhagavadgītā* (1<sup>st</sup>- 2<sup>nd</sup> century), though it is often described as a discourse on “bhaktiyoga.” As Burchett describes (and scholarly consensus seems to agree) “bhakti is presented primarily as a devotional type of yoga—that is, as a disciplined concentration of all one’s mental faculties on Kṛṣṇa” (Burchett 2019, footnote 83). It is key here that the *Bhagavadgītā* integrates bhakti with yoga – bhakti and yoga are interwoven. Friedhelm Hardy explains: “Yoga remains the technique, and *jñāna* the goal, of bhakti, which in turn brings to both meditational technique and its goal a theistic modification” (1983, 29). According to Krishna Sharma, the terms yogi and bhakta are synonymous in the context of the *Bhagavadgītā* (1987, 115).

The single occurrence of “bhaktiyoga” is found in the *Bhagavadgītā* 14.26: “And the one who, unfailingly, with the yoga of offering love (*bhaktiyogena*), serves me – That one, transcending these ‘qualities,’ prepares oneself for being united with Brahman” (trans. Schweig 2007). Bear in mind that at the time and place of the *Bhagavadgītā*, bhakti is a more Vedantic intellectual bhakti (sometimes even referred to as “yogic bhakti” in academic writing), it was not until the early modern period that Northern bhakti met the influence of South Indian emotional devotional bhakti of the Tamil Āḷvārs. The *Bhagavadgītā* relies on yogic means to harness the mind and purify discernment to enable theistic meditation, and that by devotional concentration on the Divine (Kṛṣṇa), one can achieve the highest realized knowledge (*jñāna*) (Burchett 2019).

### Bhakti in the *Yogasūtra*

As discussed, yoga was first systematized in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali (dated to the second to fourth centuries), which includes an eight-fold path of yoga. There is no usage of the term “bhaktiyoga” in the *Yogasūtra*. However, I will home in on *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* (devotion to the Divine), a Niyama within the eight-fold path and discussed in YS 1.23-1.28 (trans. Powell 2018):

YS 1.23: *īśvarapraṇidhānād vā*

- Or, [*Samādhi* is obtained] due to devotion to the Lord.
- YS 1.24: *kleśakarmavipakāśayair aparāmṛṣṭaḥ puruṣaviśeṣa īśvaraḥ*  
The Lord is a special Puruṣa, untouched by the Kleśas (mental afflictions), Karmas, [their] ripening, or by [their] depositories.
- YS 1.25: *tatra niratiśayam sarvajñabijam*  
In Him, the seed of omniscience is unsurpassed.
- YS 1.27: *tasya vācakah praṇavaḥ*  
His sonic expression is *OM*.
- YS 1.28: *tajjāpas tadarthabbhāvanam*  
Repetition of that [i.e., *OM*]; resting in its meaning.

In his translation of the *Yogasūtra and Bhashya of Vyasa*, Hariharananda (1960) comments on YS 1.23 that by doing this special kind of devotion (*Īśvaraṇidhāna*) one obtains the grace of god, and thus concentration and liberation become “imminent.”

There is active discussion among scholars as to what “*Īśvara*” refers to, and how to fairly describe it while being cautious not to appropriate it with bhakti color. This leads into the question of how much *bhakti* was involved in the *Yogasūtra*, if any. “*Īśvara*” (often represented by “*OM*” or *praṇavaḥ*) in the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali according to Gerald Larson is an impersonal god consciousness, not a deity, and thus it is a practice of “turning towards god for self-transcendence.” He argues that within the eight-limbs, *Īśvaraṇidhāna* does not fully map onto the bhakti of early modern India as it lacks elements of emotional devotion, relationship with the Divine, or community. Larson understands it more as meditation (on om) in order to attain pure consciousness (the aim of yoga). However, as discussed, prior to the twelfth century bhakti thrived and existed with a different meaning, a more general sentiment of reverence, service, and faith - as opposed to the later emergence of distinct emotion-oriented devotion.

De Michaelis (2005) points out Georg Feuerstein's translation of the *Yogasūtra* which describes *Īśvara* in terms of a “Neo-Jungian archetypal function,” and she suggests this more general conceptualization of “god” better appeals to modern Western yoga circles. I will speak more to modern reinterpretations of the *Yogasūtra* momentarily.

Consistent with many of the themes presented thus far, the *Yogasūtra* is a distinctly yogic text that respects and includes bhakti, specifically within the context of meditation. And to iterate, meaning of bhakti the meaning has not been static.

A phenomenon of increasingly devotional re-interpretations of the *Yogasūtra* emerged with Śrīvaiṣṇavism in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Within Śrīvaiṣṇavism, *yoga* is one of five daily ritual activities (*pañca-kāla*): *abhiḡamana* – (morning rituals to approach God), *upādāna* (collecting objects needed for ritual worship), *ijyā* (daily *pūjā*), *svādhyāya* (reciting and studying sacred texts), and *yoga*. (Atkinson 2022). Nāthamuni, the tenth century Śrīvaiṣṇava acharya/founder, and Rāmānuja, and eleventh century Śrīvaiṣṇava who later developed the theology of *Viśiṣṭādvaita Vedānta*, were key figures.

Regarding the *Yogasūtra* Nāthamuni explains that via “practice and detachment from objects that attract the senses,” one realizes *samādhi*, and thus “becomes closer to God.” He adds a bhakti spin onto the aim of yoga. Without invalidating or dismissing renunciation and austerities, Nāthamuni took the stance that those methods were no longer very relevant in society – that *Īśvaraṇidhāna* is far more accessible and thus should be what is taught and promoted. Rāmānuja openly reconstructed the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali with more theistic color. Though his doctrine shares the same aim to still mental activity, he

emphasizes meditation on the Supreme Person, dependence on God for any spiritual progress, and that ultimately the *ātma darśana* derived from yoga serves to intensify devotion. (Atkinson 2022; Desikachar and Krishnamacharya)

### **Bhaktiyoga in The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa***

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, dated to between the ninth and tenth centuries, became the canonical text of Vaiṣṇava bhakti. Summarized by Burchett (2019, 47), numerous authors have posited “that the passionate and ecstatic bhakti expressed in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* constitutes a distinctive new form of devotion that is markedly different from the more intellectual and contemplative forms of *bhakti* that find expression in different ways in the Bhagavad-Gītā, the Viṣṇu Purāṇa, and Rāmānuja’s teachings” – one that was more embodied (Holdredge 2015).

It is notable that the phrase *bhaktiyoga* occurs fourteen times in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, a significant testament that this was a working concept at the time. Friedhelm Hardy (1983) describes it as “an opus universal attempting to encompass everything.” Keeping in mind that it was composed at a time that *bhakti* was intertwined with (even inseparable from) yoga, tantra, and asceticism, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* held an added role of blending South India strong devotional bhakti with North Indian brahmanical Sanskritic tradition (Burchett 2019; Holdredge 2015). Could the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*’s role in encompassing what was already occurring between bhakti and yoga - and even adding new links across the Indic religious landscape - correspond to its use of the compound term *bhaktiyoga*, which increases significantly as compared to earlier texts.

The *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* contains strong yogic (including tantric and Pātāñjalian) presence, with references to controlling the breath (*prāṇāyāma*), restraining senses (*pratyāhāra*), use of body posture (*āsana*), visualization, meditation (*dhyāna*), mental concentration (*dhāraṇā*), mental repetition of the mantra as a sonic form of a deity, merging with the Divine, and instructions on how to acquire *siddhis* (superpowers). It frames yoga as necessary and preparatory for bhakti. While bhakti is certainly emphasized in a new way, according to Burchett (2019), “one finds that alongside mentions of impassioned *bhakti* are reference after reference to practices of yoga, asceticism, renunciation, and tantric ritual ... as a whole the text articulates a bhakti that cannot be easily—if at all—separated from practices of renunciation, tantric worship, and yoga” Burchett (2019, 153). As book 3, chapter 32 describes, the highest spiritual goal is possible only for one “whose mind has been composed and rid of all attachments through faith [*śraddhā*], devotion [*bhakti*], daily practice of yoga [*yoga abhyās*], and renunciation [*virakti*].”

Through the voice of Kṛṣṇa, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* articulates three yogas (it does not use the word *mārga*, or path): *jñāna*, *karma*, and *bhakti* (book 11, chapter 20.6-8), emphasizing bhakti as the highest yoga or “a very specific type of yoga practice” (Bryant 2017). Bhakti goes a spiritual step beyond yoga: that *in addition to* merging into the awareness of the individual atman (pure consciousness) as is the goal of Pātāñjalian yoga, that bhakti reveals the higher truth of loving relationship with and awareness of the Divine (it includes the experience of the *ātman*, but vastly surpasses it). Similarly, the *Bhaktirasāmrtasindhu* text explains “for Kṛṣṇa bhakti, it is this vision of God that is the true goal of the eight-limbed yoga.” (Bryant 2017, 70)

In the context of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, Edwin Bryant (2017) uses the terms “bhakti” and “bhaktiyoga” synonymously in his discourse and liberally cross-references the *Yogasūtra* to illuminate bhakti. Bryant quotes from the text (book 11, chapter 29): “there are as many varieties of bhakti as there are bhaktas who practice it: The path of bhakti yoga assumes many forms, my dear lady. It Manifests variously,

according to the permutations of the gunas manifest in people's nature" (Bryant 2017, 55). And, "the impulse for taking up bhakti in the first place is the same as that for any aspiring yogi undertaking any path of yoga" Bryant 2017, 3) - namely, worldly suffering, caused by ignorance about one's true nature. He asserts that bhakti is a "yoga process" and that a bhakta is "a type of yogi who practices bhakti (Bryant 2017).

## Twentieth-Century Bhaktiyoga

Moving towards the twentieth century, Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902) played a role in making yoga more scientific and secular - and thus more appealing to global audiences. He developed his own Yoga philosophy based on *Yogasūtra* and wrote many works including "Bhakti Yoga" (2003) which includes nearly fifty references to "bhakti-yoga." By January 1896 "the Swami's fundamental teachings" included "the four paths of yoga:" Karmayoga, Jnanayoga, Rajayoga and Bhaktiyoga). If bhakti were a "path of yoga", a type of yoga – that would support use of bhaktiyoga as a compound and moreover might imply that is ontologically distinct and systematized. The *Bhagavadgītā* and *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* set a precedent for bhakti as a type or way of yoga, though there is some debate as to how clearly. Bhakti conceptualized as one of "the four paths of yoga" became common understanding, one that persists today. In Vivekananda's words from 1985:

"Every man must develop according to his own nature. As every science has its methods, so has every religion. Methods of attaining the end of our religion are called Yoga, and the different forms of Yoga that we teach are adapted to the different natures and temperaments of men. We classify them in the following way, under four heads:

Karma Yoga: The manner in which a man realizes his own divinity through works and duty.

Bhakti Yoga: The realization of a divinity through devotion to and love of a personal God.

Rajah [sic] Yoga: The realization of divinity through control of mind.

Gnana Yoga: The realization of man's own divinity through knowledge.

These are all different roads leading to the same center - God. (De Michelis 2005, 124)

Of note, in his popular translation of the *Bhagavadgītā*, Swami Chidbhavananda (1898-1985) labeled each of the eighteen chapters as a "yoga," with his justification that each chapter offers a methodology that "trains the body and the mind." Thus chapter 12 is titled "Bhakti Yoga." This was not original to the text but has fallen into popular use.

Both Rāmānuja and Nāthamuni were influential on Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989), considered to be the father of modern postural yoga. Like others, he reinterpreted the *Yogasūtra* from a strong bhakti devotional position. He asserts that "among all the available means that we have, *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* is the main one. . . *Īśvara-praṇidhāna* is the only possible way to attain superior states of mind." Krishnamacharya effectively establishes bhakti into what becomes modern postural yoga: "The *ashtāṅga-yoga* is nothing other than a series of methods to reinforce devotion." Iyengar followed suit in *Light on Yoga* with prominent bhakti concepts, though he also internalized God to be the inner realm of the practitioner, the Self. His adds devotional tone to YS 1.50: "*Samādhi* means yoga and yoga means *samādhi*: both mean profound meditation and supreme devotion." Michaelis ventures to guess that Iyengar knew that yoga's popularity depended upon it being not religious: "as most MPY teachers, [he] is keen to preserve the polyvalence of his teachings and practices so that all may be able to access them. He knows very well that he is talking to globalized, multifaith, multicultural audiences." Indeed, by-and-large theistic color has faded from modern yoga which leans towards being secular and distances itself from devotional attributes. (De Michelis 2005).

As demonstrated, the term “bhaktiyoga” appears with a distinct increase in frequency in the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century), and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* becomes the canonical text of the Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava bhaktas. Gaudīya Vaiṣṇava, also known as Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism, began with Kṛṣṇa Caitanya in the late 15th century and was spread by early disciples including Rūpa Goswāmī. In the twentieth century Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism spread to the West (in the setting of changes resulting from British occupation of India), in which A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupāda played a key role, especially for Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism reaching the United States. Thus, bhakti encountered the ripe counter-cultural currents of New York City in 1960s.

Swami Prabhupāda wrote many works and gave many lectures on bhakti, yoga, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*, and the *Bhagavadgītā*. I am going to suggest, that Prabhupāda was largely responsible for catapulting usage of the term “bhaktiyoga” in yoga and bhakti circles of the West and rekindled the historical trend of integrating yoga and bhakti. Surveying Prabhupāda’s commentary (purport) on the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* reveals phenomenal usage of “bhaktiyoga” - more than I could numerate – and heavy bhakti-yoga references. Here are some examples:

SB 1.2.28-29: Yoga means to get into touch with the Supreme Lord. The process, however, includes several bodily features such as āsana, *dhyāna*, *prāṇāyāma* and meditation, and all of them are meant for concentrating upon the localized aspect of Vāsudeva represented as Paramātmā.

SB 3.29.35: Actually, yoga means meditation on the form of Lord Viṣṇu. If the yoga practice is actually performed according to the standard direction, there is no difference between yoga and bhakti-yoga.

SB 6.4.32: Yoga means bhaktiyoga because yogīs also accept the existence of the all-pervading Supreme Soul and try to see that Supreme Soul within their hearts.

SB 10.2.6: The word yoga means "link." Any system of yoga is an attempt to reconnect our broken relationship with the Supreme Personality of Godhead.

### Occurrence of “Bhaktiyoga” in Texts

I have thus far presented on the history, practice, and connotation of *bhaktiyoga*. To assess known written occurrence in the texts, I electronically searched the *Mahābhārata*, the *Bhagavadgītā*, the *Yogasūtra* of Patañjali, and the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* for search terms bhaktiyog\* and bhaktiyuk\*. I caution how much meaning or interpretation is done based on quantifying the occurrences of a term in texts: as we know, texts did not capture all of what was happening in practice. The results are tabulated/compiled as follows, and what is most significant is that the term bhaktiyoga became prominent in the seventh/eighth centuries. Prior to the *Purāṇas*, the concepts of bhakti and yoga were certainly related in practice, though the specific compound term, bhaktiyoga, was essentially absent.

Text (total occurrence)	Number of occurrences bhaktiyog* and bhaktiyuk*
<i>Yogasūtra</i> of Patañjali (0)	None
<i>Mahābhārata</i> (5)	bhaktiyog* occurs 4 times; bhaktiyuk* occurs once
<i>Bhagavadgītā</i> (1)	bhaktiyog* occurs once
<i>Bhāgavatapurāṇa</i> (14)	<i>bhaktiyog*</i> occurs 14 times

## Conclusion

To return to the main question at hand, bhakti and yoga are certainly intertwined in history, but where they meet do they merge (i.e., as bhaktiyoga)? Is there enough evidence of integration to illuminate the compound bhaktiyoga? Or, could it be that like cutting with razor sharp knife, that as soon as you slice one into two, the two halves appear to re-join behind the movement of the knife.

As separate entities, yoga and bhakti are both embodied philosophical practices, both provide soteriological means for liberation from suffering; both have meanings that have changed over time. Generally, bhakti (as devotion) is important throughout all Indic religious traditions - in various ways, subject to the alchemical effects of time, place, societal values, geography and the religious landscape.

I was surprised that throughout his book Burchett (2019) describes that the dominant modern academic assumption is that bhakti and yoga are polar and distinct. Where, in so many communities of modern practitioners (Western and Indian) “bhaktiyoga” is a well-accepted term that creates no confusion or conflict. Though Carman (2005) points out that the tendency of Western academic to want to “capture” and define human experience presents a particular challenge when it comes to bhakti (the very nature of which is an individual embodied experience).

Based on what I have presented, I will attempt to summarize the story of “bhaktiyoga.” In the early history of yoga (pre-twelfth century), yoga and bhakti were very much integrated, however bhakti had a slightly different (more general) connotation at that time. The *Bhagavadgītā* presented bhakti as a type of devotional yoga (with one mention of “bhaktiyoga,” among four mentions in the greater *Mahābhārata*), and the *Yogasūtra* clearly embraced bhakti sentiment in its path (though did not reference “bhaktiyoga”). Combining the existing emotional bhakti of South India with the yoga of North India, the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* offered a bhaktiyoga path with distinct elements of both bhakti and yoga represented and respected (with fourteen references to “bhaktiyoga”), and it became a canonical text of *Vaiṣṇavism*. In the tenth and eleventh centuries *Śrīvaiṣṇavism* adapted the *Yogasūtra* to become “more bhakti,” emphasizing devotion to and meditation on God as necessary for any spiritual progress. As Burchett details (2019), in the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries “a new bhakti sensibility emerged out of the interwoven threads of devotion, yoga, tantra, and asceticism;” followed by a shift, between the sixteenth to eighteenth century when attitudes towards tantric yogis withered to negativity, and bhakti openly criticized and aggressively distanced itself away from being associated with “yoga” or labeled as “yogis” (paradoxically, “on the ground” the bhakti still utilized yogic practices). Heading into the twentieth century Vivekananda was lecturing on “bhakti yoga,” and along with Krishnamacharya and Iyengar supported reinterpreting the *Yogasūtra* with devotional emphasis. In the ripe earth of America in the 1960s, Prabhupada sparked the global spread of Caitanya Vaiṣṇavism (with the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* as its most important text) using the term “bhaktiyoga” more liberally than previously seen in religious discourse. And finally, as bhakti popularized in the West, so did a very secularized bhakti-free modern postural yoga.

As we have seen, there is clear historical evidence of “bhaktiyoga” in texts and in practice. Burchett specifically states that bhakti and yoga have existed “on a spectrum in which they may be far apart or may merge into one another completely” (2019, 22). According to Sarbacker (2020), yoga can refer “to specific modes and goals of practice, and thus may be qualified by compounding the term with particular categorical designations of technique.” I am inclined to agree with Bryant, that – *at least* in the context of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* and subsequent traditions based on it – that bhakti and bhaktiyoga are used interchangeably. It is understandable that despite the tight integration of practices, bhaktas moved away from identifying as “bhaktiyogis” in the early modern period (in favor of simply,

“bhakta”). As discussed, many master practitioners of yoga did not necessarily use the label *yogī* due to attitudes towards it, or perhaps simply trends and conventions of identifying otherwise. With Prabhupada, came a dramatic resurgence in use of “bhaktiyoga,” which I suggest explains its prevalence in current modern spiritual circles.

If bhakti and bhaktiyoga are in some contexts synonymous, this creates confusion with the South Indian devotional bhakti traditions (like the Tamil Ālvārs) that were part of the sixth century “bhakti movement” and to my knowledge did not incorporate yoga in their views (this could be an area of further inquiry) –such traditions might be better candidates to wear the hat of simply “bhakti.” These traditions originated before “the new bhakti sensibility” that Burchett describes.

This all makes me wonder if the story of bhakti and yoga could be embodied in the truthy words of Pema Chodron (1996): Things “come together and they fall apart. Then they come together again and fall apart again. It’s just like that. The healing comes from letting there be room for all of this to happen.”

Bhaktiyoga has demonstrated its place in the Indic religious landscape. But how much does validating this categorical term matter? It seems ultimately up to the traditions and practitioners themselves to understand or identify as bhaktiyoga or bhaktiyogis. Hawley concludes that bhakti is “primarily what bhaktas have said it is,” rather than a categorical term owned by academia. And Bryant reminds us that that “there are as many variegated expressions of bhakti yoga in India as there are ...human hearts wherein it ultimately resides.” Pauwels (2010, 509) echoes that academic research should utilize a “continuum of religious expression with porous religious boundaries” instead of distinct categories. Indeed, many scholars choose to treat bhakti as a spectrum (of embodiment, of yogic influence, of emotion, etc), which seems to argue in support of “bhaktiyoga” owning its porous-ness and being justly on that spectrum. And Carman reflects that “...perhaps bhakti, although distinctly Hindu, may be appropriated and developed, if not by the proud at least by the humble, in a great variety of religious and cultural communities” (Carman 2005)

Understanding bhaktiyoga necessitates a great deal of historical nuance, and an appreciation that bhakti has always been - and remains - in motion. As bhaktiyoga spreads globally, and has contact with more diverse cultures, politics, values, and religions, where might this alchemy lead next? Could there be something new happening in the Western spiritual kinship with the term bhaktiyoga? Bhakti will no doubt maintain its mystery, evade binary academic discourse, and continue to flow and bend with time.

### **Author’s Note:**

A desire to resolve confusion about “what is bhakti, and what is yoga?” was what first led me to Yogic Studies. So, it seems fitting to conclude the program by dealing with those questions here. I did my best to honor this topic with the gravity within my reach, knowing this doesn’t fully illuminate the topic. Especially as a bhaktiyoga practitioner myself, I am most eager for the humbling moment that look back on this and think “I got that all wrong,” which only then would truly dignify the nuance and motion of bhakti. May any knowledge I gain serve only to further my devotion and lessen my attachments. My thanks go to the patience, inspiration, and grace of my teachers, most notably here, Raghunath Cappo, Ram Dass, and Seth Powell, as well as Indian gurus and sadhus who have so generously engaged with me and reinforce that Bhakti is the highest yoga.

Rām Rām.

## Bibliography:

Atkinson, Simon. 2022. *Krishnamacharya on Kundalini – The Origins and Coherence of his Position*. Bristol: Equinox Publishing Ltd.

Bevilacqua, Daniela. 2017. “Let the Sādhus Talk: Ascetic Understanding of Haṭha Yoga and Yogāsanas.” In *Religions of South Asia* 11.2-3: 182–206.

Bryant, Edwin F. 2017. *Bhakti Yoga: Tales and Teachings from the Bhagavata Purana*. New York: North Point Press.

Burchett, Patton. 2013. “Bitten by the Snake: Early Modern Devotional Critiques of Tantra-Mantra.” In *Journal of Hindu Studies* 6: 1–20.

Burchett, Patton. 2019. *A Genealogy of Devotion: Bhakti, Tantra, Yoga, and Sufism in North India*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Burchett, Patton. 2021. “YS 115: A History of Yoga and Devotion.” <https://www.yogicstudies.com>. Accessed September 2022.

Carman, John. 2005. “Bhakti.” In Jones, L (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition*. Detroit: Thompson Gale.

Chodron, Pema. 1996. *When Things Fall Apart. Heart Advice for Difficult Times*. Boulder: Shambhala

Cort, John. 2002. “Bhakti in the Early Jain Tradition: Understanding Devotional Religions in South Asia.” in *History of Religions* 42: 59–86.

Davis, Richard. 2015. *Bhagavad Gita, A biography*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

De Michelis, Elizabeth. 2005. *A History of Modern Yoga*. London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Dobe, Timothy. 2015. *Hindu Christian Faqir: Modern Monks, Global Christianity, and Indian Sainthood*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Frazier, Jessica. 2013. “Bhakti in Hindu Cultures.” In *The Journal of Hindu Studies* 6:101–113.

Hardy, Friedhelm. 1983. *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Kṛṣṇa Devotion in South India*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Hawley, John Stratton. 2015. *A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti Movement*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Holdredge, Barbara. 2015. *Bhakti & Embodiment: Fashioning Divine Bodies and Devotional Bodies in Kṛṣṇa Bhakti*. New York: Routledge.

Krishnamacharya, Tirumali and Desikachar, TKV. Date unknown. “Yoga-sutra 1.23”. In *Viniyoga Europe* 9:31–36.

Monier-Williams, Sir M. 1899. *A Sanskrit English Dictionary*. Springfield: Nataraj Books.

Pauwels, Heidi. 2010. “Who are the enemies of the bhaktas? Testimony about ‘Śakta’ and ‘Others’ from Kabīr the Rāmānandī, Tulsīdās, Raidās, and Harirām Vyās.” In *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 130: 509–39.

Powell, Seth and Bryant, Edwin. "Episode 25: Edwin Bryant, Bhakti Yoga and the Bhagavatapurana" from *The Yogic Studies Podcast with Seth Powell*. <https://podcast.yogicstudies.com>. Accessed September 3, 2022.

Prabhupāda, Swami A. C. Bhaktivedanta. Commentary on the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa*. [https://vaniquotes.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://vaniquotes.org/wiki/Main_Page). Accessed on November 17, 2022.

Rhodes Bailly, Constantina. 1987. *Shaiva Devotional Songs of Kashmir: A Translation and Study of Utpaladeva's Shivastotravali*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Sarbacker, Stuart R. 2020. *Tracing the Path of Yoga: The History and Philosophy of Indian Mind-Body Discipline*. Albany: SUNY Press.

Schweig, Graham. 2007. *Bhagavad Gita: The Beloved Lord's Secret Love Song*. New York: HarperCollins.

Sharma, Krishna. 1987. *Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective; A Study in the History of Ideas*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers.

Swami Hariharananda Aranya. 1960. *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali*. Calcutta: Calcutta University Press.

Swami Vivekananda. 2003. *Bhakti Yoga* (a published lecture given in NY, NY 1896). Leeds: Cephalis Press