

Dialogues With Yoga Masters
Bhakti Yoga
Chaitanya and the Shikshastakam

Translation and rendering by Prem Prakash

There is a divine love which surpasses reason, logic, and all self concern. It arises when your life remains centered around your beloved. (8.6)

Preface

The Shikshatakam, literally, “Eight Verses of Instruction,” is attributed to Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, the 16th century Bengali revitalizer of Krishna devotion. The Eight Verses are a magnificent presentation of bhakti yoga, the yoga of spiritual devotion. The text focuses on devotion, yearning, and grace. It describes a path filled with the two petals on the flower of love: separation and union.

Chaitanya is probably best known as the proponent of chanting the now well-known Hare Krishna mantra: Hare Krishna, Hare Krishna, Krishna Krishna, Hare Hare, Hare Rama, Hare Rama, Rama Rama, Hare Hare. Chaitanya is considered an avatar, an incarnation of God, by many of his followers. They believe he is an incarnation of Krishna, who came to demonstrate chanting the Hare Krishna mantra as a devotional path.

Although Chaitanya travelled and taught for three decades, the Shikshastakam is the only writing ascribed to him. From an objective standpoint, there is little evidence that Chaitanya himself is actually the author. There is significant evidence the text was more likely a compilation of his teachings as remembered by one or more of his devotees. Regardless, the power and devotion of Chaitanya come through the verses, making the Shikshatakam one of the most revered texts in the bhakti tradition.

Shikshastakam

Q. Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, great master, I have heard you are capable of helping frightened, confused and lonely souls like me. What should I do to enter the spiritual life?

cetodarpaṇamārjanaṁ (1.1)
cetaḥ - of individual consciousness
darpaṇa - mirror
mārjanaṁ - cleansing

You must cleanse the mirror of your heart, your individual consciousness

Q. What does this entail?

bhavamahādāvāgninirvāpaṇam (1.2)
bhava - emotional content
mahādāvāgni - blazing forest fire
nirvāpaṇam - extinguish

Extinguishing the blazing fire of fear in the forest of your emotions.

Q. What will happen as my fear is extinguished?

śreyaḥ kairavacandrikāvitarāṇam (1.3)
śreyaḥ - good fortune
kairava - white lotus
chandrikā - moonshine
vitarāṇam - blossoming

You'll feel like a white lotus of good fortune blossoming under the glow of the moon.

Q. Will my confusion also extinguish?

vidyāvadhūjīvanam (1.4)
vidyā - wisdom
vadhū - wedded
jīvanam - life of the soul

Yes, because your innate wisdom is then married to the life of your own soul.

Q. Will my loneliness finally end?

anandambudhivardhanam (1.5)

ānanda - bliss
ambudhi - ocean
vardhanam - expanding

Yes, it will, because you will feel yourself expanding into the ocean of bliss.

Q. How is it possible to leave my current world and enter your world?

pratipadam purnāmṛtāsvādanam (1.6)

pratipadam - with each step
purnāmṛta - fulfilling ambrosia
āsvādanam - drinking

It will feel natural because with each step on this path you will drink to your full from the bowl of ambrosia,

sarvātmasnapanam param (1.7)

sarva - complete
ātmasnapanam -bathing the soul
param - Supreme

and your soul will be completely bathed in the Supreme.

Q. I do not feel worthy of such a blessing.

vijayate śri kṛṣṇa saṁkīrtanam (1.8)

vijayate - victory
śri kṛṣṇa - Beloved God
saṁkīrtan - chanting

This doesn't matter. Victory will be accomplished by chanting the divine names of Sri Krishna, Beloved God.

Q. What are these divine names?

nāmnāmakari bahudhā (2.1)

nāmnām - the names
akāri - manifested
bahudhā - varieties

The divine names are sound manifestations of the different aspects of God.

Q. Which is the best of the divine names?

nijasarvaśakti (2.2)
nija - God's own
sarva - all
śakti - energies

The are equally potent as they all contain God's energies.

Q. Is there a requirement for who can meditate on the divine names?

svatatrārpitā niyamataḥ (2.3)
svatatra - in that
arpitā - bestow
niyamataḥ - no limitations

No, there are no limitations in who can approach God through the divine names.

Q. Do I need a special place or time to meditate.

smaraṇe na kālaḥ (2.4)
smaraṇe - remembrance
na - no
kālaḥ - times

No, there are no boundaries of time and place in remembering God through the divine names.

Q. It seems that most spiritual paths require more preliminaries and commitments.

etādṛśī tava kṛpā bhagavan (2.5)
etādṛśī- such is
tava - your
kṛpā - grace
bhagavan - sweet Lord

You are correct, such is the grace of our sweet Lord that these divine names are available to all, everywhere, all the time.

Q. This is wonderful news. Why doesn't everyone take advantage of the divine names?

mamāpi (2.6)
mama - my own will (resistance)
api - although, alas

Alas, we resist the grace.

Q. This seems so sad.

durdaivamīdṛśam ihājani nānurāgaḥ (2.7)
durdaivam - extreme misfortune
īdṛśam - it is such
ihājani - no arising
nānurāgaḥ - no passion

You are right. Such is our extreme misfortune, that we have no driving passion for God's divine names.

Q. With what attitude should I meditate on the divine names?

tṛṇādapi sunīcena (3.1)
tṛṇādapi - the trodden grass
sunīcena - lowly

Humbly feel yourself to be lowly, like trodden grass,

tarorapi sahiṣṇunā (3.2)
tarorapi - similar to a tree
sahiṣṇunā - tolerance

and have the tolerance and patience of a tree.

Q. This is so different from the world of competition and judgement.

āmaninā mānadena (3.3)
āmaninā- without pride
mānadena - give respect to everyone

Yes, this is the polar opposite approach to relationships. On this path, you are to be without egoic pride and to offer your respect to everyone.

Q. Won't I be miserable if I am kinder to others than they are to me?

kīrtanīyaḥ sadā hariḥ (3.4)
kīrtanīyaḥ - chanting the divine names
sadā - always
hariḥ - Hari, the Remover of Misery

If you approach relationships in the manner I am teaching, your misery will end. You will find yourself spontaneously chanting the divine names and invoking Hari, the Remover of Misery.

Q. Can you tell me about the benefits I will gain by meditating on the divine names?

na dhanam (4.1)
na dhanam - no wealth

First I will tell you what you will not gain. You will not attain wealth,

na janam (4.2)
na janam - no public acclaim

nor public acclaim,

na sundarīm (4.3)
na sundarīm - no beautiful companion

nor a beautiful companion,

kavitām vā (4.4)
kavitām vā - nor eloquence

nor eloquence.

Q. But these are the things I want! If I don't gain these, what will I gain?

jagadīśa kāmāye (4.5)
jagadīśa - Lord of the world
kāmāye - to desire

You will gain the desire to desire the Lord of the world.

Q. What's in it for me?

mama janmani janmanīśvare (4.6)

mama - my only
janmani - in birth
janmani - lifetimes
īśvare- Lord

Only the longing to take birth in order to spend each lifetime in devotion to the Lord.

Q. I'm not sure that's what I really want.

bhavatādbhaktir ahaitukī tvayi (4.7)

bhavatāt - may there be
bhaktiḥ - spiritual devotion
ahaitukī - without motive
tvayi - for you

Your candor is admirable. Someday, you will find yourself praying for nothing but selfless, spiritual devotion for God.

Q. If I do decide I want devotion, how should I pray?

ayi nandanūja (5.1)

ayi nandanuja - O' son of Nanda

Call out to your beloved, he is a divine child, as are you.

Q. What should I say to him?

kiṅkaram (5.2)

kiṅkaram - servant

Declare yourself as His servant.

Q. I am reluctant to be anyone's servant.

patitaṁ mām (5.3)

patitaṁ - fallen
mām - me

Your honesty will serve you well. It will suffice if you simply recognize you have fallen into unhappiness.

Q. I admit my unhappiness is very deep.

viṣame bhavāmbudhau (5.4)
viṣame - horrific
bhavāmbudhau - ocean of emotional pain

Unhappiness is the surface level of a deep ocean of horrific emotional pain.

Q. How can I get out of this pain?

kṛpayā (5.5)
kṛpayā - via grace

Only through grace.

Q. How can I prepare for grace?

tava pādapaṅkajasthitadhūlīsadr̥śaṁ (5.6)
tava pādapaṅkajasthitadhūlīsadr̥śaṁ - like a speck of dust at your lotus feet

You cannot prepare because your worthiness is inconsequential. This is a gift from another. Place yourself like a speck of dust at His lotus feet.

Q. Will He really give me His grace?

vicintaya (5.7)
vicintaya - please

I guarantee it! If you ask, "Please?"

Q. What does it feel like when His grace is felt?

nayanaṁ galadaśrudhārayā (6.1)
nayanaṁ - eyes
galadaśrudhārayā - spilling tears

Tears spill from the eyes,

vadanam gadgadaruddhayā girā (6.2)

vadanam - mouths
gadgada - halting
ruddhayā - choking
girā - words

speech is halting, choked back,

pulakairnicitam vapuḥ (6.3)

pulakaiḥ - horripilation
nicitam - cover
vapuh - flesh

and hairs stand on end, covering the flesh.

Q. Is His grace really this glorious?

tava nāmagrahane (6.4)

tava nāma - your name
grahane - earnestly call

You will know for yourself when you earnestly call His names.

Q. When will this take place?

kadā bhaviṣyati (6.5)

kadā bhaviṣyati - when will this take place

Yes, dear one. This is what you need implore: "When, O' when will this take place?"

Q. Hearing your teachings, I am becoming anxious for grace.

yugāyitam nimeṣena (7.1)

yugāyitam - extensive period of time
nimeṣena - a moment

When grace commences, you begin to feel each moment of separation from your beloved as if it were a tremendous chasm of time.

Q. Are you saying the pain of separation is a sign of love?

cakṣuṣā prāvṛṣāyitam (7.2)

cakṣuṣā - from the eyes
prāvṛṣāyitam - like a rainstorm

Yes, the gift of separation brings sweet tears which fall from the eyes like rain.

Q. How can tears be a gift?

śūnyāyitaṁ jagatsarvaṁ (7.3)
śūnyāyitaṁ - empty, void
jagat - world
sarvaṁ - everything

Because they do not arise from petty concerns. They come from pangs of longing, when the whole world feels empty of meaning and void of happiness without the beloved.

Q. Why would anyone want such a depressing vision?

govinda virahaṇa me (7.4)
govinda - Govinda, the gatherer of souls
virahaṇa me - my separation

Because the receding of the world means Govinda is gathering you to Him. Your time of separation is nearing an end, and the culmination of your yearning is at hand.

Q. How does it feel to love so deeply?

āśliṣya vā pādaratām (8.1)
āśliṣya - delightful embrace
vā - or
pādaratām - at the feet (close to)

There is an exquisite delight at the mere thought of being close to the beloved or having his embrace.

Q. How is this different than the pleasure of fulfilling a superficial desire?

pinaṣṭu mām adarśanan (8.2)
pinaṣṭu - trample
mām adarśanan - not being with me

Here, love does not fade away even if your heart feels trampled because your beloved is absent.

Q. Isn't this crazy?

marmahatām karotu vā (8.3)

marmahatām - my heart

karotu - break

vā - or

Absolutely. There is a delicious madness in relishing a heart broken from devotion to divine love.

Q. It's hard to imagine such a love.

yathā tathā vā vidadhātu (8.4)

yathā - like this

tathā vā - or like that

vidadhātu - as he wishes

In selfish love, there is always bargaining. Divine love flourishes regardless of specific behaviors or circumstances, as long as the beloved is happy.

Q. But shouldn't my beloved be faithful to me?

lāmpaṭaḥ (8.5)

lāmpaṭaḥ - amorous with others

You are still bargaining. In divine love, one finds happiness even if your beloved is happy being amorous with others.

Q. This isn't reasonable.

matprāṇanāthastu sa eva (8.6)

matprāṇa - my life

nāthaḥ - Lord

tu sa eva - still only he

There is a divine love which surpasses reason, logic, and all self concern. It arises when your life remains centered around your beloved.

Q. But don't I need to take care of myself?

nāparaḥ (8.7)

nāparaḥ - only he

In divine love, there is no separate self. There is only the beloved.