

# Achieving the Self – Transcendence through Bhakti Yoga: A Conceptual Exploration

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## Abstract:

*Bhakti Yoga connects individuals to the supreme divine by fostering selfless love, surrender and a connection beyond the ego. In parallel, Self-transcendence is the process of rising beyond personal ego and self-interest to connect with a higher purpose, ultimate truth and divine consciousness. This paper explores the concept of self-transcendence within Maslow's hierarchy of needs through the lens of Bhakti Yoga knowledge, drawing insights from ancient texts. Through a conceptual and textual analysis, this study examines how Bhakti facilitates self-transcendence by dissolving personal identity into a higher consciousness. Ancient Bhakti literature provides intensive insights into Bhakti as a means to transcend material limitations and ego-driven desires. This paper integrates perspectives from these texts, illustrating how Bhakti not only nurtures emotional well-being but also serves as a transformative force that guides individuals toward a higher state of consciousness.*

*This research paper highlights how devotion, as described in ancient scriptures, enhances spiritual elevation and psychological well-being, presenting a bridge between traditional wisdom and modern psychological discourse.*

**Key Words:** Bhakti, Self-Transcendence, Bhakti Yoga, Navadha Bhakti, Bhagavad gita, Supreme, Spirituality.

## Introduction:

A journey of self-discovery and personal evolution often characterizes human life. Various psychological and spiritual traditions have explored pathways that enable individuals to realize their highest potential. One such psychological framework is Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, which outlines human motivation progressing from basic physiological needs to self-actualization and extended to self-transcendence.

Self-transcendence, a state of going beyond individual identity to experience unity with the ultimate reality. Seeks to further a cause beyond the self (This may involve service to others, devotion to an ideal (like- truth) or a cause (like- a religious faith), and/or a desire to be united with the supreme divine.) and to experience a communion beyond the boundaries of the self through peak experience. This may include mystical experiences and experiences with nature and/or other transpersonal experiences, in which the person experiences a sense of identity that transcends or extends beyond

the personal self)(Koltko-Rivera, 2006). This concept is closely parallel to Bhakti Yoga.

Bhakti Yoga, emphasizes surrender to the Supreme Divine, shedding material attachments and promoting an unconditional love that leads to ultimate liberation(Jyotirmayananda, n.d., pp. 21–24). Scriptures like Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Narada Bhakti Sutra, Shandilya Bhakti Sutra, and Bhagavata Purana provide systematic guidance on how devotion can elevate an individual beyond personal fulfillment to a state of divine realization. The essence of Bhakti Yoga lies in its ability to dissolve the ego, replace self-centered tendencies with selfless service, and establish a deep, emotional connection with the Divine(Trasi, n.d., p. 191). While Maslow's theory offers a scientific understanding of human needs and their motivation, Bhakti Yoga provides a time-tested, experiential methodology for attaining self-transcendence.

This paper aims to bridge the gap between Western psychological theories and Eastern spiritual traditions by analyzing Bhakti Yoga through the lens of self-transcendence. It also highlights universal applicability, demonstrating how Bhakti can serve as a structured pathway to achieving higher consciousness through self-transcendence. This paper also shows how Bhakti Yoga provides a practical and transformative method for transcending the self and attaining a state of pure, unconditional love and divine unity.

### **Bhakti Yoga:**

Bhakti Yoga is the path of devotion, love and complete surrender to the Supreme Divine, leading to spiritual realization and self-transcendence. It emphasizes pure, selfless love for the Supreme, transcending ego and material attachments etc.

### **Shrimad Bhagavad Gita (12.6-7) –**

ये तु सर्वाणि कर्माणि मयि संन्यस्य मत्परः।  
अनन्येनैव योगेन मां ध्यायन्त उपासते॥  
तेषामहं समुद्धर्ता मृत्युसंसारसागरात्।  
भवानि न चिरात्पार्थं मर्यावेशितचेतसाम्॥

“Shri Krishna Said, Those who dedicate all actions to Me, surrender fully to Me with devotion (Bhakti) and meditate upon Me with unwavering focus, I quickly rescue them from the cycle of birth and death.”, This verse highlights complete surrender and devotion as the key to spiritual liberation.

### **Narada Bhakti Sutra (Verse 2) –**

“सा तस्मिन् परमप्रेमरूपा”

“Bhakti is intense love for the Supreme Divine, which liberates one from all worldly attachments.” This denotes love as the core of Bhakti Yoga, which leads to freedom from material bondage.

### **Shandilya Bhakti Sutra (1.2) –**

“सा परानुरक्तिईश्वरे”

“True devotion is unwavering, selfless love for the Supreme without any expectations.” This defines Bhakti Yoga as selfless and unconditional devotion and a path to go beyond desires.

### **Bhagavata Purana (1.2.6) –**

स वै पुंसां परो धर्मो यतो भक्तिर् अधोक्षजे।  
अहैतुक्य् अप्रतिहता यथा आत्मा सुप्रसीदति॥

“The highest form of religion which teaches pure, uninterrupted devotion to the Supreme, bringing complete satisfaction to the soul is called Bhakti.”, This explains Bhakti as the most fulfilling and direct path to spiritual bliss.

### **Ramayana (Uttarakanda, 6.113) –**

“भक्तिर्भगवति भाव्या हि तस्यैव परमं पदम्”

“A devotee who serves with a pure heart and love attains eternal joy and freedom from suffering.” This shows how devotion leads to transcendence of worldly suffering.

### Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs:

Abraham Maslow, a renowned psychologist, developed the Hierarchy of Needs theory (1943-1954), which explains human motivation in a five-stage pyramid. Initially, he proposed that individuals progress from basic physiological needs to self-actualization, the highest stage of personal fulfillment (Koltko-Rivera, 2006).

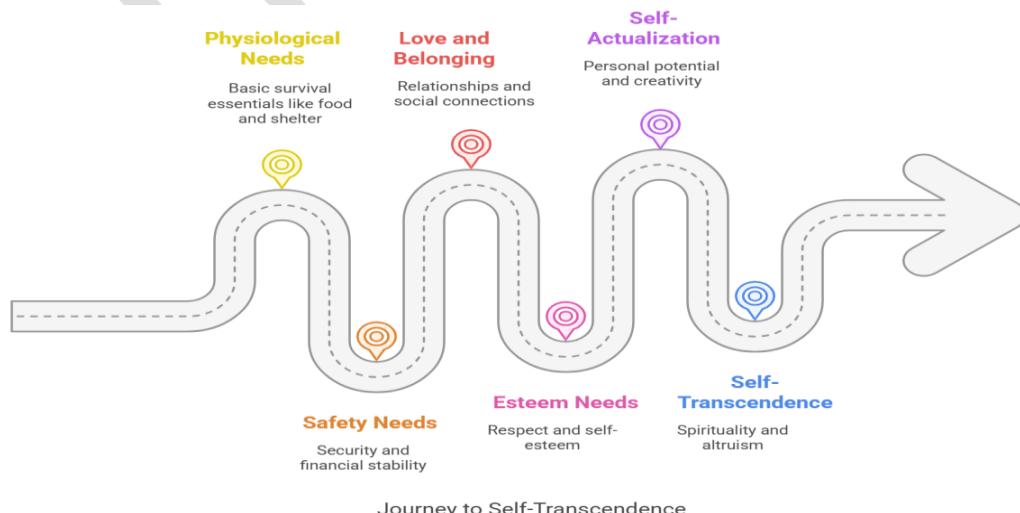
“It is quite true that man lives by bread alone — when there is no bread. But what happens to man's desires when there is plenty of bread and when his belly is chronically filled? At once other (and “higher”) needs emerge and these, rather than physiological hungers, dominate the organism. And when these in turn are satisfied, again new (and still “higher”) needs emerge and so on. This is what we mean by saying that the basic human needs are organized into a hierarchy of relative prepotency” (*Classics in the History of Psychology -- A. H. Maslow (1943) A Theory of Human Motivation*, n.d.).

In 1970s, Maslow expanded the hierarchy and includes a sixth and final stage, Self-

Transcendence. This stage goes beyond personal fulfillment, focusing on selfless service, higher consciousness and unity with the Supreme divine.

Maslow's theory is traditionally represented as a pyramid of human needs, progressing as follows:

1. **Physiological Needs** – Basic survival needs and biological requirements for human survival, like - air, food, drink, Home (shelter), clothing and sleep etc.
2. **Safety Needs** – Security, financial stability, health and well-being.
3. **Love and Belongingness** – It refers to emotional need for interpersonal relationships, affiliation, connectedness to others, family etc.
4. **Esteem Needs** – Respect, status, self-esteem and recognition.
5. **Self-Actualization** – Achieving personal potential, creativity and self-improvement.
6. **Self-Transcendence** – Going beyond the self to experience a higher reality, often through spirituality, altruism or devotion (*Simplypsychology.Org-Maslow's-Hierarchy-of-Needs.Pdf*, n.d.).



### **Self-Transcendence:**

Self-transcendence is the highest and most evolved stage of human development where an individual moves beyond ego-centric desires and experiences a deep connection with the universe, humanity, or the divine. Unlike self-actualization, which is about fulfilling personal potential, self-transcendence is about losing the sense of individual identity and merging with a higher reality(Worth & Smith, 2021).

Maslow (1971) stated, “Transcendence refers to the very highest and most inclusive levels of human consciousness, behaving and relating, as ends rather than means, to oneself, to significant others, to human beings in general, to other species, to nature, and to the cosmos.” This means that self-transcendence is not merely a personal achievement but a state of absolute interconnectedness(Venter, 2016).

### **Self-Transcendence and Bhakti Yoga:**

Self-transcendence is the highest stage of human consciousness, where an individual moves beyond personal identity and ego, experiencing unity with the divine or a higher reality. Abraham Maslow, in his later works, introduced self-transcendence as the ultimate stage beyond self-actualization, characterized by selfless service, deep spiritual connection, and unconditional love. Bhakti Yoga, the path of devotion, provides a structured and practical approach to achieving this transcendental state. Rooted in ancient scriptures, Bhakti Yoga offers progressive stages of transformation that guide an individual from ego-centered existence to a state of divine love and universal oneness(Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022).

Self-transcendence, as explained in Bhakti texts, is the process of dissolving individual ego (Ahankara) and experiencing the divine presence in all aspects of life. The Bhagavad Gita (6.47) establishes Bhakti as the

supreme path to self-transcendence. Unlike self-actualization, which focuses on personal fulfillment, Bhakti transcends individuality, fostering an absolute connection with the divine (Bhagavad Gita 18.66). The ultimate realization in Bhakti is not about achieving personal perfection but surrendering completely to divine love(Jyotirmayananda, n.d., p. 188).

The Narada Bhakti Sutra (Verse 19) emphasizes that Bhakti is beyond intellectual knowledge and rituals, states “Bhakti is not dependent on caste, creed, or knowledge. It is pure, selfless, and leads directly to liberation, which confirms that Bhakti Yoga is universally accessible and provides a direct path to self-transcendence, unlike knowledge (Jnana) or action (Karma), which require deeper intellectual engagement(Chidananda, n.d., p. 120).

### **Tools of Bhakti Yoga (Navadha Bhakti) leading to Self-Transcendence:**

Bhakti Yoga systematically leads to self-transcendence through the nine progressive stages mentioned in the Bhagavata Purana (7.5.23):

1. **Shravanam (Hearing the Divine Names and Stories)** – Listening to divine narratives cleanses the heart (Bhagavata Purana 1.2.17).
2. **Kirtanam (Chanting the Divine Names)** – Singing the Lord’s glories purifies the mind and removes ego (Bhagavata Purana 1.2.18).
3. **Smaranam (Remembrance of the Divine)** – Constant awareness of the divine dissolves material attachments (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 8.14).
4. **Padasevanam (Service to the Divine)** – Selfless service cultivates humility and love (Bhagavata Purana 9.4.18).
5. **Archana (Worship and Offerings)** – Devotion through

rituals enhances spiritual consciousness (Bhagavata Purana 10.81.4).

6. **Vandanam (Prayer and Reverence)** – Sincere prayer deepens emotional surrender (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 9.22).
7. **Dasyam (Becoming a Servant of the Divine)** – Recognizing oneself as a servant of the divine removes ego (Ramayana, Aranya Kanda).
8. **Sakhyam (Friendship with the Divine)** – Developing a personal bond with the divine dissolves separateness (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 9.29).
9. **Atma-Nivedanam (Complete Surrender)** – Total surrender leads to absolute transcendence (Shrimad Bhagavad Gita 18.66) and emphasizes that true liberation is attained through total surrender to the divine. This surrender (prapatti) is the core principle of Bhakti Yoga, where the devotee ceases to identify with the ego-driven self and fully accepts divine will(Trasi, n.d., pp. 201–211).

Each stage gradually purifies the heart, removes self-centered desires, and strengthens devotion, leading to complete self-transcendence.

#### **Key Personality Characteristics Cultivated Through Bhakti Yoga: The Essential Path to Self-Transcendence**

In Shrimad Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 12 (Bhakti Yoga), Lord Krishna describes the qualities of a true devotee who is dear to Him. These characteristics reflect a pure and transcendent personality, which naturally leads to self-transcendence.(Vyas, n.d., p. 51) Below are the key Characteristics mentioned in verses 13-20, with their meanings, Scripture references and rationale for Correlation with Self-Transcendence:

S.No	Characteristics of Devotee	Scripture Reference	Meaning of Characteristics	Rationale for Correlation with Self-Transcendence
1.	Free from Hatred	Adveshta Sarva-Bhutanam (अद्वेष्टा सर्वभूतानां) – (Verse 12.13)	A devotee harbors no hatred or malice towards any being and maintains a compassionate heart.	Eliminates ego-driven conflicts, fostering universal love and unity.
2.	Friendly and Compassionate	Maitrah Karuna Eva Cha (मैत्रः करुण एव च) – (Verse 12.13)	A devotee is kind, loving, and merciful toward all, treating everyone with equal care and concern.	Develops deep empathy, reducing self-centered behavior.
3.	Free from Attachment	Nirmamo (निर्ममो) – (Verse 12.13)	They do not have a sense of possessiveness or egoistic attachment toward people or material things.	Detachment from material and personal attachments leads to inner liberation.
4.	Free from Ego	Nirahankarah (निरहङ्कारः) – (Verse 12.13)	A devotee is humble, without false pride, and does not identify with the ego.	Dissolution of ego allows one to surrender to a higher consciousness.

5.	Equanimity in Joy and Sorrow	Samah Dukha-Sukhah (समः दुःखसुखः) – (Verse 12.13)	A devotee remains balanced in both happiness and suffering, without extreme emotional reactions.	Helps transcend personal emotions, achieving balance in life.
6.	Forgiving Nature	Kshami (क्षमिः) – (Verse 12.13)	Forgiveness is a key quality; a true devotee does not hold grudges and readily forgives others.	Reduces karmic burdens and allows freedom from resentment.
7.	Always Content	Santushtah Satatam (सन्तुष्टः सततं) – (Verse 12.14)	A devotee is always satisfied and content with whatever comes, free from greed and dissatisfaction.	Contentment removes cravings and desires, leading to inner peace.
8.	Self-Controlled	Yatatma (यतात्मा) – (Verse 12.14)	One who has control over their mind and senses, ensuring they act with wisdom and discipline.	Mastery over senses leads to spiritual progress and detachment.
9.	Firm Determination	Dridha Nishchayah (दृढनिश्चयः) – (Verse 12.14)	A devotee possesses unshakable faith and resolution in their spiritual journey.	Strengthens focus on the spiritual path, preventing distractions.
10.	Mind and Intellect Surrendered to the Divine	Mayyarpita-Mano-Buddhih (मर्यपितमनोबुद्धिः) – (Verse 12.14)	Their thoughts and intelligence are fully dedicated to the Supreme.	Merging one's identity with the divine enables transcendence of the self.
11.	Free from Worldly Expectations	Anapekshah (अनपेक्षः) – (Verse 12.16)	A devotee does not crave worldly achievements or rewards.	Freedom from material dependency leads to higher consciousness.
12.	Purity	Shuchih (शुचिः) – (Verse 12.16)	Both external cleanliness and internal purity (pure thoughts and intentions) are essential.	Purifies thoughts and actions, aligning with divine consciousness.
13.	Skillful and Efficient	Dakshah (दक्षः) – (Verse 12.16)	A devotee performs duties diligently and with sincerity, without laziness or negligence.	Enhances disciplined action without attachment to results.
14.	Neutral and Unaffected	Udasina (उदासीनः) – (Verse 12.16)	They remain detached from success and failure, praise and criticism.	Helps in maintaining mental stability beyond worldly concerns.
15.	Free from Distress	Gata-Vyathah (गतव्यथः) – (Verse 12.17)	A devotee is not disturbed by worldly suffering, having	Overcoming suffering fosters spiritual resilience.

			surrendered to divine will.	
16.	Neither Overjoyed nor Hateful	Na Hrishyati Na Dveshti (न हृष्यति न द्वेष्टि) – (Verse 12.17)	A devotee does not experience extreme excitement in gains nor hatred in losses.	Balances emotions, preventing ego-driven reactions.
17.	Steadfast in Devotion	Bhakti-Yukta (भक्तियुक्तः) – (Verse 12.17)	Constantly engaged in devotion, worship, and remembrance of the divine.	Constant divine remembrance leads to ultimate self-realization.
18.	Equal to Friends and Enemies	Sama-Shatrau Cha Mitre Cha (समः शत्रौ च मित्रे च) – (Verse 12.18)	A devotee treats both enemies and friends with equal regard, without bias	Eliminates bias, creating oneness with all beings.
19.	Unaffected by Praise or Criticism	Tulyaninda-Stutih (तुल्यनिन्दास्तुतिः) – (Verse 12.19)	A devotee remains steady, regardless of whether they are insulted or praised.	Freedom from external validation strengthens inner realization.
20.	Free from Attachment	Aniketah (अनीकेतः) – (Verse 12.19)	They do not consider anything as permanent, knowing the world is temporary.	Seeing the world as temporary removes deep-rooted material attachment.

These characteristics systematically refine a devotee's mind, emotions, and actions, enabling ego dissolution, universal love, and detachment from material limitations—all of which are key factors in self-transcendence as per Maslow's theory (Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2022). By embodying these traits, an individual moves beyond self-actualization and attains oneness with the divine, experiencing boundless peace and bliss (Fuchs, 2019).

### Conclusion:

Bhakti Yoga is not a religious or ritualistic practice but a profound method of self-transformation. By emphasizing selfless devotion, complete surrender and an unwavering connection with the Divine, Bhakti Yoga offers a structured pathway to achieving self-transcendence. This state, as recognized by Maslow, represents the highest level of human development, where individuals move beyond ego-centric needs and experience unity with the universe and the Divine.

The study establishes that Bhakti Yoga systematically leads practitioners from personal identity to divine consciousness through progressive stages of devotion. The Navadha Bhakti framework and the qualities of a true devotee, provide a practical roadmap for cultivating self-transcendent characteristics such as compassion, humility, and detachment. Bhakti Yoga shifts the focus from the self to a higher reality, enabling individuals to transcend suffering and achieve lasting peace.

So, the correlation between Maslow's self-transcendence and Bhakti Yoga underscores the universality of Bhakti as a psychological and spiritual phenomenon. While modern psychology often limits self-growth to cognitive and emotional dimensions, Bhakti Yoga integrates these

with spiritual realization, presenting a holistic framework for achieving the highest state of consciousness.

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