



## **C G Mayya on Devotion**

I met [C G Mayya](#) in late 2015, when he visited the [Center for Mindful Learning's](#) residential program, the [Monastic Academy for the Preservation of Life on Earth](#). In mid-2016, he came to lead a retreat at the Monastic Academy. I found this retreat extremely powerful. Here is the testimonial I wrote for him:

*I was so grateful when Girish (C G Mayya) agreed to lead a retreat at Center for Mindfulness/MAPLE'S Monastic Academy. I had a strong sense that he would bring us genuine teachings that would bear real fruit in the practice for me and other residents at CML. Girish delivered that and more. His talks and guidances demonstrated a breadth of familiarity with this practice and its forms across many traditions, and he could clearly and helpfully distill that wisdom. And in interacting with him individually, he demonstrated a depth of real, direct understanding of practice in a way that pointed me in the new direction. I felt a sense of safety, adventure, and*

*courage with him as a guide – a combination that, for me, has resulted in a new trust in my own wisdom.*

For most of the retreat, I worked on a choiceless awareness practice. This balanced an over-emphasis on stable attention with a connection to open awareness.

After the retreat, I read Mayya's book, [Discover Your Free Mind: An Ancient Inquiry to Modern-Day "Dis-eases" of Anxiety, Stress, Depression, Conflicts, & Addictions](#). (See my review [here](#).) The book helped me connect what I had already worked on with Mayya to his other teachings about inquiry.

My main teacher, Soryu Forall, emphasizes Four Ways, or broad categories of techniques, for practice: Cultivation, Observation, Inquiry, and Do Nothing. Meditators and experienced practitioners will have a sense of what these are; others might read my essay *A Joke* to get a sense of this.

With Forall, and in my career as a meditator more broadly, I have largely used Observation techniques: following my breath, noting and labeling sensory experiences, etc. But, having worked on a kind of Do Nothing practice very intensely with Mayya, and being exposed to Inquiry through his book, I realized that it might be worth exploring and developing familiarity with each category.

This brings us to Cultivation. When Mayya told me by email that he was exploring writing about other areas of spiritual practice, including devotion and heartfulness, I sent him a series of questions about devotion. His replies were quite helpful to me, and I will be considering them for some time. I have shared them here for the benefit of other practitioners.

## Questions

Here are the questions I asked him:

- I came to the Monastic Academy because of a theistic metaphor or symbol that suggested itself to me. But the Monastic Academy, while excellent for meditative and spiritual practice, as well as for living a life of service in community, does not tend to emphasize or engage with theistic metaphors. Since I consider myself a theist, but train in an agnostic/atheist spiritual tradition, I sometimes feel cognitive (spiritual) dissonance between my intentions and the training center.
- What is the role of devotion in spiritual practice?
- What does it mean that devotion is a heart-based approach?
- What does theistic devotion look like?
- What are the advantages of non-devotional practice?
- What does atheistic devotion look like?
- What does agnostic devotion look like?
- What are the advantages of devotional practice?

- Is everyone an aspiring Bodhisattva? Am I an aspiring Bodhisattva? Does this dog have the Buddha nature? (Do I have the Buddha nature?) Should I take Bodhisattva vows?

**I came to the Monastic Academy because of a theistic metaphor or symbol that suggested itself to me. But the Monastic Academy, while excellent for meditative and spiritual practice, as well as for living a life of service in community, does not tend to emphasize or engage with theistic metaphors. Since I consider myself a theist, but train in an agnostic/atheist spiritual tradition, I sometimes feel cognitive (spiritual) dissonance between my intentions and the training center.**

Is there really a difference or is the difference merely at a conceptual level?

Could it be that the nature of your cognitive dissonance is due to the difference in perspective toward spirituality as understood in theism versus the perspective of agnostic/atheist spiritual traditions?

The main difference in the traditional model of theistic and atheistic traditions could be broadly summed up as “Religious versus Spiritual” and at a deeper level as “Spirituality versus Practice.”

Much of religion or non-religion is based on finding a ground of self-identification; agnosticism has greater latitude to question such identifications. Because spirituality is only real to us at a personal level when we can connect to it as a practice. What is experiential and experimental has very little to do with identification with any ideologies (such as the existence or non-existence of God).

Coming back to your comments, most spiritual training centers do, however, take on some form of ideology. It seems necessary for the harmonious functioning of the center, where having diverse range of beliefs makes it hard to find a common ground of conduct. But on the other hand, conflict within any community, or within the global community, is not because we are diverse but because we expect others to conform to our ideals, and in some extreme cases impose our beliefs onto others. If our conduct is guided only by ideologies, then of course it is a shaky ground as ideologies keep changing throughout our lives. Besides, true heart qualities of tolerance and understanding cannot be shaped by beliefs alone.

Nevertheless, we have to choose our environment carefully. Environment is a strong force in shaping our beliefs, ideologies and even our heart's inclinations. As you know, I made references to the socio-cultural aspects, the effect of communities and its influence on the mind, in my book (*Discover Your Free Mind*). It is important to understand this form of freeing the mind as well which doesn't come directly under the purview of any meditation practice. So I want to briefly point to it again:

Many of us carry a sponge-like mind that absorbs, consciously or unconsciously, all that it interacts with. For instance, if you live within the heart of an urban city for too

long, you get so used to such an artificial type of existence of being cut off from nature. Your habits and your thinking take on the collective mentality that justifies our way of living and causes us to look down on the lifestyles of indigenous people who continue to live without many such comforts of modernization. Similarly, if you read too many books or hear teachers in the same spiritual tradition for too long, then you shape your experiences and language within that domain, regardless of your heart's unfolding journey.

When we begin to tap into our heart's true intentions, one of the first things that we become capable to act upon is to “choose” our environments in tandem with our intentions. You may have seen this when you initially chose to go to your training center rather than going with the flow of the life chosen by your peers. However, as your understanding matures and your connection to your own spiritual nature deepens, you begin to unravel the wordless and formless nature of your intentions. Here again it's possible that your current living environment may not be supportive at the level you intended and you are naturally prodded to make outer changes or to consider modifying your roles. But instead, you can also choose to discern within your outer environment what is applicable to your inner journey. Then with a hermit-like attitude, you can be “devoted” to these intentions and to your own unfolding spirituality, no matter where you are. Of course, this requires compromises and adaptation at the external level of your environment. But your heart's journey shall remain unimpeded when you remain true to your intentions.

From this perspective the right kind of “devotion” can help to deepen your intention and resolve the nature of your spiritual dissonance.

### **What is the role of devotion in spiritual practice?**

For our clarity, we need to first have a functional definition of what does devotion mean with respect to spiritual practice.

Devotion, especially in most western spiritual traditions, has been expressed in the form of religious piety through prayers and rituals. Devotion in practice (rather than as a spiritual practice) is seen as obedience to a moral code of behavior. When you become devoted in your religion, following the conduct and moral code as prescribed by that religion is considered as an act of devotion.

At a broad level, we can all be *devoted* to some goal or other in life, whether or not we are undergoing spiritual training. For instance, if you are doing a Master's or PhD program, you need to have a certain amount of devotion to your research in order to complete it. Then there are those of us who are devoted to their families---a mother to her children, a daughter to her father, a husband to his wife, a student to her teacher and every other kind of human relationship. Can these also be considered devotion? There is certainly some common elements in such acts of devotion as there is to spiritual practice.

Devotion from a spiritual context is that quality of the heart which imbues in us reverence to a form or to a path that has the potential to lead to inner freedom. Devotion has to do with nurturing within us the faith toward our practice; or, in some cases, toward a specific form of God or a teacher or a teaching. Without devotion, we lack the commitment to following a path, no matter what kind of path it is. So *the role of devotion has to do with sustaining and inducing faith in our spiritual practice.*

Devotion in spirituality is mostly an internal practice and thus esoteric in nature. Almost all religion encourages this form of communion with divinity, or union with a higher mind, within the depths of one's heart (and soul). The rituals of every tradition also have some form of contemplation that emphasize this internal and personal role of devotion. If not, there would not have been followers merely based on teachings alone.

Within the eastern contemplative traditions that what is esoteric in most religions is actively sought after in exoteric practices. Within Indian yoga meditation for example, interiorizing one's energy and consciousness help to bring the practitioner directly to that mental state of devotion. It is an internal state of what in Christianity has been referred to as Communion. Such an internal form of communion has been historically revived time and again in Christian traditions through personal experiences and practices referred to by various saints.

Buddhism, on the other hand, has used various meditative methods to transform mental and emotional afflictions and thus places minimal emphasis on the heart-based quality of devotion; except for the Tibetan Vajrayana path (which perhaps drew its influence from the Indian bhakti yoga system -- the devotional path to divine union). In the Tibetan tradition, the form of devotion that is most common is of the student to the teacher, or to the nature of Awareness, which we shall go into later. Otherwise, most Buddhist traditions have instead focused on heart qualities of compassion and reverence, as a form of devotion rather than the practice of devotion itself.

Nevertheless, within these two eastern models we can derive the general variations of devotion that applies to most religious traditions in the world. So I will try to address the rest of the questions from these two perspectives.

### **What does it mean that devotion is a heart-based approach?**

In recent times, we hear some people refer to mindfulness also as "heartfulness." There is something about this heart quality that is important to us as a spiritual practitioner, no matter what angle we approach spirituality from. As Helen Keller once said, "The most beautiful things in life cannot be seen or touched, but can be felt by the heart."

Devotion is a heart-based approach towards our practice that induces us with faith in our chosen path and nurtures it with the energy of a fresh, open and receptive mind. Without this receptivity and openness of the mind, our heart is not able to raise above its clinging to pleasures and selfishness. In other words, Devotion is that “leap of faith” that opens the heart to spirituality. It is also that what brings the mind to direct knowing or truth or the personal experience of divinity.

When the Yogi Paramahansa Yogananda wrote about his famous cosmic consciousness experience, he related to it as: *I cognized the center of the empyrean as a point of intuitive perception in my heart.* Most of our spiritual experiences can be experienced from this point in the heart and many spiritual teachers have made references to it. Our various positive uplifting experiences in life--- the joy of watching a rainbow, giving and receiving a hug from a loved one, the innocent smile of a child, the warm greeting of your pet---are all experienced at this dimensionless space within the heart.

Yet the heart is also the center of “defilements” (as referred to in Theravada Buddhism with reference to three kinds of greed, aversion, and indifference) and the meannesses (as referred to in Indian scriptures of hatred, shame, fear, grief, condemnation, race prejudice, pride of family, smugness.) This is where the challenge of a heart-based approach arises because it not merely the center for spiritual freedom but also a source of bondage (commonly referred to as samsara). So the “training” for most spiritual seekers is to train the heart so that we are neither led by the meannesses nor swayed by momentary experiences of love and bliss to create a certain addictive pattern in our mind.

Ultimately, the spiritual journey is the journey of the heart; the perception and experiences of the heart are the basis for what we refer to as “awakening,” the state of inner freedom and pure Awareness. What purifies this perception of the heart is the natural unfolding of devotion, a divine gift and an act of grace. Devotion is the sublime form of heart energy that can lead us to the pure space of Awareness and higher consciousness. Our intentions and the attitude we take to our practice, our teachers and the teaching is the doorway to the heart's natural devotion.

### **What does theistic devotion look like?**

Devotion can broadly categorized into: Form-based devotion, formlessness based devotion, and the devotion to the pure Awareness that penetrates both form and formless.

Form-based devotion is reverence to a specific form of God, Teacher, Teaching that give a structure and direction to the conceptual mind. Theistic devotion best caters to it, *although not exclusively.*

Formlessness-based devotion is the reverence to mystical nature of life felt as spaciousness, presence, beauty, love, etc. There is an element of sacredness to these

perceptions. This form of devotion can manifest in theistic devotion as well when we mentally connect the form of our adoration to formless nature of perception. Your reference to Salim Edward Michael represents this, of making the connection of God to perception within one's heart:

*As Salim had a naturally devotional temperament, every evening after a glance to make sure that the other members of the household were already asleep, he sat on his bed and, brushing his lips with his fingertips, blew God tender kisses. He would continue this unusual ritual for several minutes, sometimes as much as half an hour, until he finally felt that this time, the kiss was true, that it was, as it should be, conveyed with the whole of himself. Then, pleased with having done what was necessary, he would go back to bed and fall asleep.*

Many Christian Saints have been able to realize similar theist devotion. I have personally lived in monasteries where I have observed certain monks engage in similar forms of devotion, which was so sweet and child-like (not childish). Brother Lawrence, whom I wrote briefly about in my book, integrated the form and the formless devotion aspects quite well. He referred to it as Practicing the Presence of God. His devotion had both the elements of transcendence and immanence to it.

The third category of devotion is also inherent in his approaches. It is devotion to the nature of pure Awareness that pervades form and formlessness. It is also devotion to the condition of mind that could lead to the arising of pure quality of Awareness. Yet the main difference in this category of devotion is that it is not sought out through rituals, energy practices, or any mental effort, as we are used to. I have elaborated more about this in my book on the Nature of Free Mind.

But I shall present another perspective to understand this here. If we consider most forms of theistic devotion, we can label them as being “dualistic.” There is a subject-object reference to everything in form-based devotion. As such it requires effort and a goal to work toward. But unlike many non-dual proponents and teachings, the esoteric aspect of devotion in theist devotion is common to the non-dual atheist type traditions as well.

The essence of non-dualism is that the effort and the goal, the observer and the observed are considered as NOT being different. Rather, at some point of making the effort, there is the wisdom that we are part of the goal toward which the effort is directed. There is a metaphor commonly used in eastern philosophy to illustrate this non-separation: no matter how high the wave goes, it begins to realize that its rise and fall is within the Ocean.

However, the “seeing” of this is not only the wisdom but also the opening of the heart-mind. From a theist perspective, we can begin to connect to God as the source of our being, and in God we have our being. Such esoteric, non-dual play of theist devotion can be seen in the poems of Rumi, Kabir, and various Sufi poets.

## **What are the advantages of non-devotional practice?**

Devotion has a certain personal element to it, especially when we regard the theist form-based devotion. So we can start to consider the nature of atheism where the personal devotion element is lacking. In other words, there is less regard of spirituality in such non-devotional practice because everything comes under the purview of a scientific perspective. Life in its outward form gains deeper meaning.

Stephen Hawking, when he claimed to be an atheist went on to say, "Before we understood science, it was natural to believe that God created the universe, but now science offers a more convincing explanation." He continued onto say, "In my opinion, there is no aspect of reality beyond the reach of the human mind." It is such beliefs that have empowered mankind toward many discoveries in science.

It is also undeniable that science is the cause of much progress in civilization. Although from a spiritual perspective, the growth of science doesn't always equate to the growth in spirit, we seem to have in science a non-devotional practice approach that provides a better standard for mankind to rely upon.

Some staunch atheists go on to state that all spiritual experiences are merely "brain activities." The validity for such a stance arises when we consider that several religious experiences that people talk about are medically proven to be some form of hallucination or mental disorder.

Devotional approach can take extreme forms as in the case of religious terrorism that we see in the world today. Based merely on ideologies, religion becomes a means to nurture the evil designs of mankind. In fact, much of the hatred and killing in the world in the name of religion has convinced many to take to non-devotional practices. These "practices" are then rooted in reason and secular in nature, based mostly on morality and conduct without the biases of religious beliefs.

When human faculty of common sense is compromised in the name of faith, devotion is a detrimental force. We can also see this in spiritual groups where people cling to their own path as being superior and try to cut down all other teachers and teachings. It is pitiable that we cannot honor other traditions because of our own identifications and prejudices.

In such cases, secular and reason based practices have an advantage.

## **What does atheistic devotion look like?**

I would go further to ask: Why is it that in atheistic/agnostic practices, particularly in Buddhism, devotion is not considered important? Are compassion and other humanistic approaches the same as devotion?

Atheism in particular has a scientific perspective as mentioned above. A subtler form of atheism is what many Buddhists take to, where gods or God is seen as a diversion to one's goal of enlightenment. The historical Buddha urged breaking all notions of faith that people take to in order to address the verities of life. His words may also have been because of the heavy influence of blind faith that pervaded Indian religions at that time.

Nevertheless, Buddhist following has an element of faith as well that is similar to the atheistic faith. The Buddhist "leap of faith" is in denying the form realms of spirituality so that the mundane aspects of life can themselves become sacred. In other words, the objects that manifest in the present moment become the prop for awakening.

Buddhist scriptures go further to break down objects into those that have the nature of "ultimate reality" and those that are conceptual and mentally constructed. Most objects in our everyday life are imbued with the reality of decomposition and decay, although our minds are habituated to mentally project a notion of continuum on everything.

The objects and forms are seen through its inherent ephemeral nature, which then becomes the pathway to the formless manifestations of insight and wisdom. When we cease to mentally review or use memory to call back upon a form, we are no longer experientially cut off from our experience of the present moment. Of course, I refer more about this in my book, where I suggest that our mind states and aspects of the consciousness are the only reference points into the present moment experience. Without investigation into it, we are disconnected from the nature of pure Awareness permeates, the one Present Moment of past, present and future.

So what does all this have to do with atheistic devotion?

Mere atheistic devotion is just the element of faith cultivated either through intellectual or emotional stimulation, not through a breakthrough in one's practice and realization. But because the nature of atheistic devotion comes with alignment to traditions, whether it is Tibetan or Zen Buddhism, or the Taoist traditions, there is a certain conceptualizing and dualism inherent in it despite its non-dual nature. Such dualism is again dependent on imbued concepts rather than personal investigation.

So in that sense, I consider that Buddha, and the truly awakened non-dual teachers encouraged a form of agnostic like inquiry. The devotion of an agnostic is what I consider to be the true motivation for secular-spiritual practitioners.

**What does agnostic devotion look like?**

In writing about agnosticism in a recent article, I wrote:

*Few decades ago, Bertrand Russell struggled to define the nature of Agnostic spirituality and how it was different from atheists. Little did he foresee that years later a growing trend would arise in developed countries of groups of people who would identify themselves as “Spiritual but not religious.”*

*In my own years of spiritual quest, I have adopted the forms of prayers and practices associated with religions such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. Yet it was not until I began to see and inquire within my own mind and heart on what leads to transformation in my own life, that I began stepping outside the boundaries of religious doctrines.*

*As much as I have benefited from aspects of religions and teachings, I found that when I remained within the context of the scriptures my own mind was easily influenced into their respective belief systems.*

*When I now look back, I can see that I collectively held an air of righteousness at different points, although that what I then believed was not universally or eternally right! This is what I see the fundamental difference between an agnostic approach versus that of a Theist/Atheist.*

*Although the word agnostic doesn't quite relate to what I want to convey, it is the closest category to understanding the right kind motivation that we can bring to our practices. It is the pursuit of truth, not so much in a broad universal form but as it manifests to the individual practitioner.*

*When we soften up mentally by opening to truth in whatever forms it presents to us, we go beyond the thoughts and beliefs that we had earlier identified ourselves with. Our own 'identity' may then be revealed at a much deeper level than what we had grasped at earlier, only intellectually. In such cases, the 'body of religion' will not be a sacrifice but shall lend a greater deal of integrity to our inner journey and to its intrinsic motivations.*

Agnostic devotion is the motivation I refer to above. It is the inquiry into the nature of truth and its potential to free us within our hearts and minds. It is to see and understand the condition of mind that gives rise to pure Awareness, a state of mind that is free from all forms of mental clinging. I believe the Sanskrit word for emptiness represents a state which, although empty in nature, is yet filled with all possibilities.

This is close to what I have referred to it in my book as Free Mind. All models of devotions ultimately have to lead us to Free Mind. As I see it, Agnostic devotion has the greatest potential to strip us of false identifications and dualism.

**What are the advantages of devotional practice?**

We are all devoted to something, in one way or another. Modern society, especially in America and developed nations, is devoted to a life of passion and sensory

indulgence. Every moment, we chase after some kind of excited mental state. Some are devoted to smoking, drinking, marijuana and recreational drugs. Some others are addicted to Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Netflix, etc. These “forms” that entice our attention create a conflict between our endless wants and our real needs. They leave with an attitude, which robs our reverence for life and its spiritual nature (the cause and condition for true devotion).

Devotional practice has a certain reverence wherein one realizes that the natural impulses within oneself, and the sway of individual expressions of greed, aversion, pride, jealousy, etc. comes at a certain cost. It is the cost of numbing our experience of life as we chase after life's outward expressions. The advantage of devotional practice is that it has a pull away from those physical, emotional and mental attractions to those that nourish our mind and spirit. Most importantly, devotion fills us with humility, making it possible for us to surrender our egoism to higher wisdom, whether that manifests in the form of teacher, teaching or to our own inner guidance or the seeing of Free Mind.

As humans, we have a tendency to be addicted to something -- sensory indulges, materialism, socializing, intellectual pursuits, etc. Devotion channels such energy into something sublime. It reverses the outgoing energy inward to energize our practice and spirituality. The diversion of energy to pull us towards higher and purer nature of Awareness within us is what Devotion seeks to work with.

In my book, I have used the term Inquiry quite often. But seen in its truest sense, the nature of inquiry I move towards ultimately is called “Transformative Inquiry.” In its purest mode of inquiry, it is the falling away of the egoistic and conceptual mind. We hold the questions so that it gains momentum within our hearts and ultimately transforms our false nature. Although I have not been able to express it in this kind of language (and may have also given an intellectual slant to it in my writing), at the core of it, Transformative Inquiry is the devotional practice of seeking to understand, “what does it take for us to change? How do we surrender our petty desires and littleness? Why can't we rest with our questions with the attitude of *intuitive knowing within the conceptual unknowing?*”

**Is everyone an aspiring Bodhisattva? Am I an aspiring Bodhisattva? Does this dog have the Buddha nature? (Do I have the Buddha nature?) Should I take Bodhisattva vows?**

One of the challenges in Buddhist teachings is the ambiguity that Buddha left behind by not answering specifically on the nature of Nirvana and various other concepts. Even amongst well known teachers, there isn't a consensus on what exactly constitutes Buddha nature. Because anything that is solid in nature and fixed in definition is mostly a mental construct.

Yes, there is no doubt that such concepts can give us something to aspire toward and cultivate within us. In practice however, breaking all our notions of self is the closest

that we can get to in “knowing” Buddha nature. Everything in spiritual life points to how we cannot force the knowing, but we can set the conditions for the ‘knowing’ to come to us.

Devotion is a subtler form of action—an energy that is fueled not so much by our will or force but by an inward pull. Theists attribute this energy as a mysterious force of “attraction” or as Grace.

From the Buddhist, atheistic or agnostic language, this force of attraction is considered a part of nature that responds within our hearts as we practice the brahmaviharas (four immeasurables). So we make the shift to "seeing from the wisdom of Awareness," rather than seeing from our thought structures and ego tainted vision. Then all that we see without, are forms toward which we feel pure love, because we see them as expressions of our own deeper nature...

In most traditions, the “seeing” from Awareness, or the pull felt from within, is conceptualized into a ritualistic form to aid the awakening process. It becomes a form of "embodied devotion," wherein we take vows of monasticism, Bodhisattva, or even that of committing to be a teacher to help guide others. Such forms of conceptualization are seen as being least binding and of greatest benefit to all.

However, here’s the catch... if your vows (or precepts) are seen with an attitude of strictness, of following the "letter of the law," then the dynamic nature of awareness never gets to embody itself through you. In trying to uphold the strict letter of the law, you may instead cause more harm than good... as an extreme example, think of jihadists. But if the vows are seen from the light of the “spirit of the law”, which is similar to what I have expressed in my book as the "spirit of inquiry," then you live those vows naturally, regardless of whether or not there has been a ceremonial process to give you the mantle of bodhisattva.

Ultimately, each person has to judge for themselves, or ask the guidance of their teacher, where they are in their practice, and whether such vows will help them, or whether they will only nurture their erroneous mental patterns.

© Michael Fogleman. Content licensed under [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).