

Unconditional Love: The Indian Way

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Reference to this paper should
be made as follows:

Received: 08.03.26

Approved: 18.07.26

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Indian Way*

Vol. XVII, Sp. Issue Aug. 2026

Article No.13, Pg. 101-111

Similarity Check: 07%

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DOI: [https://doi.org/10.31995/
jgv.2026.v17iSI08.013](https://doi.org/10.31995/jgv.2026.v17iSI08.013)

Abstract

Unconditional Love has been spoken of, sung about and written down in countless different ways. Yet with each new individual who discovers it, it finds a new definition, a new vigour, a new life. For some it can be found in the eyes of a true lover (Rumi and Shams), for others it can be found in every stone, every pebble, every atom (Kabir), for yet others it can be found by looking into deep uncharted space full of mysteries, and some have even found it by simply meditating under a Peepal tree (Buddha). India's tryst with unconditional love is as old as time. Equally ancient is the definition of 'India'. For the purposes of this paper, every tradition that has influenced India and, in its turn, has been influenced by India, is included in the definition of 'India'. This paper explores the various Indian traditions dealing with unconditional love and contrasts them with certain Western traditions.

Keywords: *Bhakti, devotion, Kabir, Meerabai, Rogers, Sternberg, Gita, Rumi, Shams*

**This article has been peer-reviewed by the Review Committee of JGV.*

Introduction

The modern understanding of Psychology originated in the West from the related fields of Physiology and Philosophy. Wilhelm Wundt established the first psychological laboratory in Leipzig in Germany in 1879 where he sought to understand the structure of the ‘consciousness’ through introspection. Before Behaviourism radically modified the scope of Psychology, some original definitions of the field included ‘the study of consciousness’, ‘the study of mind’, etc. Freud’s psychoanalysis was the first to suggest that an ‘unconscious mind’ exists in every human being and that anxiety-provoking memories that are repressed into it can lead to maladies. Psychology as a field has come a long way since then. New dimensions such as Cognitive Psychology, Positive Psychology, and Cross-Cultural Psychology have since found well-developed roots in the scope of the subject. No matter the divergences, the common thread that binds together all these sub-fields is the individual human being, which is the unit of analysis in all of Psychology.

However, the study of all the experiences of an individual human being will remain incomplete without the study of the ‘self’. The self is defined as “the ego of an individual”. The ego of an individual is defined as “the sum total of all thoughts, affects and behaviours of an individual that situate her understanding in maya and work to reinforce it.” According to Indian Philosophy, specifically the Advaita Vedanta, all reality is the Brahman and the movement of the Brahman creates Maya, i.e. the observable Universe. The primary difference between the Brahman and Maya is that the Brahman can be known only by becoming or embodying it, while there are multiple ways of knowing Maya including observation, measurement, quantification etc. Consequently, every individual must have within themselves the Brahman, so as to be able to experience it and must analyse their own selves to be able to experience it. Those are the crucial differences between Western Positivism and Indian Philosophy. Positivism seeks to find the Truth in others, while Indian Philosophy believes that the Truth can be found within oneself and others. It is non-exclusionary. There are many methods to find out this Truth. One very famous method is unconditional love. In India it is called Bhakti.

Western Concept

Carl Rogers believed that every individual has an innate tendency for personal growth and self-actualisation. In his Humanistic Theory, he said that people will be able to realise their full potential if given an environment of unconditional positive regard. Unconditional positive regard is when we are accepted and valued without any conditions of worth attached to love. It is pure, unadulterated love. Rogers believed it essential for effective therapy. (*Key Concepts of Rogers’ Person-Centered Approach*, 2025) Rogers stated that individuals are subject to ‘conditions of worth’ where they come to believe that they will be valued and loved if and only if they think in certain ways, act in certain ways and feel certain ways. Any deviancy results in loss of love. Therefore, unconditional positive regard from the therapist will be able to help the client work through her issues. It involves complete support and acceptance irrespective of what the client says, does or feels. It involves empathy and genuineness on the part of the therapist.

Sternberg’s triangular theory of love is one of the most famous and well-accepted theories on love. It states that there are three components of love - intimacy, passion and commitment.

These three components combine to form eight different kinds of love. In a relationship where there is only intimacy and passion, it is romantic love. Where intimacy and commitment exist without passion, it is companionate love. This is the kind of love found in geriatric couples. If passion and commitment exist without intimacy, it is fatuous love. In this theory, where all three components exist, i.e. intimacy, passion and commitment, it is said to be consummate love. However, this theory does not take into account spiritual love, or the independent existence of love. (Myers, 2023)



Figure 1: Sternberg's Triangular Theory of Love (Source: Simply Psychology)

Perhaps the single most defining characteristic of psychic consciousness is its groundedness in a deep and unconditional love, devotional in essence, accompanied by a state of sincere and total surrender to the Divine. To enter into the state of pure unconditional love, the devotee commonly uses the aids of chanting the name of the preferred deity (Rama, Krishna, Durga etc.), and singing about his love for the chosen form of divinity. In so doing, the aspirant, or shall we say rasika, experiences a dissolution of his/her ego self, wherein everyday connotations and experiences in the mundane human realm around the emotion of love are transcended, and the devotee enters into a state of pure and absolute universal love, devoid of any sense of "I" or "mine".

Indian Traditions

In India the concept of unconditional love is defined as devotion or Bhakti. While humanistic theories require the therapist to display unconditional love towards the client, Indian philosophies describe unconditional love as both a state and a process. As a state, it is another name for the Brahman. As a process it is a way to become, or reach the Brahman. It is also two-way. The Brahman is said to emanate unconditional love towards the bhakt. The test is for the bhakt to realise that God loves her unconditionally; and to love Him back in return, unconditionally. There is intrinsic pleasure or 'ananda' in such a love. Love for the sake of love, irrespective of any conditions. Achievement of the fruit of seeking is described as 'Sat-Chit-Ananda', i.e., Truth, Pure Consciousness and Bliss. Interestingly, the idea of Bliss is different from happiness, which is momentary. Bliss or ananda is external and internal. It emanates from within, requiring no external stimulus for generation. (Rajendran, 2024)

The Bhagavad Gita

The Bhagavad Gita is the foremost text describing the path of Bhakti or devotion to reach God. It emphasizes upon a deeply personal, selfless and heart-centric relationship with God. That is Bhakti for Krishna. While the Gita also gives two other ways to reach God - the Jnana Marg and the Karma Marg - the Bhakti Marg is described as the most accessible and direct route to the Brahman. It is a journey of spiritual realisation of the Truth. (*The Threefold Path of the Bhagavad Gita: Karma, Jnana, and Bhakti*, 2023)

In the Gita, true love is characterized by Nishkama Bhakti which is often translated as ‘Devotion without desires/attachment’. While in essence true, the more holistic meaning of ‘kama’ encompasses desires, attachment, lust, wishes etc. In a word the most comprehensive translation of ‘kama’ is conditions. Consequently, nishkama becomes ‘unconditional’. It is love without any expectations of reward, not even for doing bhakti. (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025) Desires for the outcome of effort or fruit of labour are also ‘kama’. While in real life this is difficult to implement, because whenever someone engages in any action, they expect results out of it. Without commensurate results, there is frustration and resentment. A feeling of an ‘unjust world’ grows. The person starts feeling despair. Actions, passion, devoted effort start feeling meaningless without any returns. Here the Gita says this is because of a false belief that the self is the doer. The Gita proclaims that it is not the limited self that is engaging in actions, rather it is the Brahman that is engaging with the world via the human. Thus, the human is just a conduit. A tool to affect the world. Like a screwdriver or a hammer. Therefore, whether the nail is hammered or remains jutting out, whether the nut has been screwed properly or not at all, is not upon the screwdriver or the hammer. This is an example of ‘Nishkama Karma’. (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025)

Nishkama Bhakti is love for love’s sake. Without any desires for the results of that Bhakti. Krishna teaches that love is at its purest when it is free from worldly desires or the hope for personal gain. He also values the simple offerings, any flower, fruit or leaf. The value of a gift is measured by the love behind it, not its material worth. “Whoever offers Me with devotion a leaf, a flower, a fruit, or even water—I accept that offering of love from the pure-hearted.” (Gita 9.26). Interestingly, there is a similar story from Konya, where Rumi, the exalted Mawlana used to be visited by devotees to seek guidance. When Shams entered Rumi’s life, he used to sometimes sit at his doorstep and would ask devotees, “What have you brought for the Mawlana that I should allow you to meet him?” While this monopoly over meeting with Rumi was disconcerting, yet people complied. Some brought gold coins, some brought fancy cloth. Upon seeing this, Shams would get angry and chase them all away. (Anna, 2025) The idea is to surrender parts of one’s ego. Such as desires, expectations, anger, attachments etc. It is the process of recognising the components of one’s ego that aids in the spiritual upliftment of the individual. Thereafter, once surrendered, it is the process of preventing the ego from taking roots again which also aids in the spiritual upliftment of the person.

The climax of the Gita’s message on love is total surrender or sharanagati, where the devotee aligns their will with the Divine will. Love requires the “I” or self to vanish or dissolve so

that God can fully reside in the heart. Krishna concludes by asking Arjuna to abandon all other duties and simply take refuge in Him, promising protection from all fear. This is His Ultimate Promise. “Abandon all varieties of religion and just surrender unto Me... Do not fear.” (Gita 18.66). What exactly it means to ‘surrender to Divine Will’ is not properly understood. However, it is clear that it does not mean passivity or inaction. It takes immense inner strength to love without conditions, to surrender the ego, and to remain steadfast in devotion even in adversity. Arjuna himself, a mighty warrior, ultimately chooses the path of surrender. The Bhagavad Gita celebrates love as the ultimate expression of devotion. It is higher than knowledge, superior to rituals, and deeper than discipline. Love is the soul’s natural yearning for the Divine, and when awakened, it leads to the highest fulfillment. (Aurobindo, 1938)

The Gita illuminates the path to spiritual upliftment for a householder who is engaging with the world and doing all her duties, while at the same time working towards Becoming. Love is described as a state where the mind naturally gravitates towards God at all times. It is a state of mind that needs cultivation, like a farmer who carefully cultivates her crops, deciding when to sow, which fertilizer to use, pulling out weeds as soon as they appear, irrigating often, protecting the plants from insects etc. A true lover of God is *Nitya-yukta* (always united), thinking of the Divine through every daily action, from working to eating with unwavering focus. The Gita expands on this idea, with Krishna advising: “Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you offer in sacrifice, whatever you give away, and whatever austerity you practice, O son of Kunti, do it as an offering to Me.” (Aurobindo, 1938)

Importance is given to ‘smaran’, i.e. remembering the name of God. Other saints have also emphasised chanting the names of God as a path to reach closer to Him. However, it is important to note that spiritual upliftment is a labor of the heart, not of the head, essentially prioritising infinite compassion and kindness over cognitions. Krishna describes His “dearest” devotees as those who are friendly, compassionate, free from malice, and equanimous in both joy and sorrow. ‘Equanimity in both joy and sorrow’ is described as the state of yoga - a man with no desires, no needs and propelled by a state of inner bliss. (*The Message of the Gita*, n.d.) By shifting the focus from ego-driven action to selfless service of the Divine, one can gradually purify the mind and transcend the binding effects of karma. In Sanskrit, the word for ‘me’ and for ‘ego’ is the same - aham. It is based on this essential philosophy that the self is the ego. The Gita also says that love for God is inseparable from love for all living beings, as the devotee recognizes the same Divine in everyone. It is said that as one progresses on the path of spirituality, there will come a time when she will start seeing the Brahman in everything. This may be true both literally and metaphorically. The Gita reveals that God is not a distant judge but a responsive, loving friend (*Suhrit*). He is the very embodiment of Unconditional Love which He emanates towards all beings. However, the love that a person has towards Him is conditional, dependent on fulfillment of prayers, social dividends, economic prosperity, legacy, welfare, victories, marriage and whatnot. Krishna promises to reciprocate love in exactly the way a devotee approaches Him. “In whatever way people surrender unto Me, I reciprocate accordingly.” (Gita 4.11). Shams made forty rules throughout his life that would help a person on their path to the Divine. One of those rules states that how we see God is a

direct reflection of how we see ourselves. If God brings to mind mostly fear and blame, it means there is too much fear and blame welling inside us. If we see God as full of love and compassion, so are we. (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025)

“Arjun said: O Infallible One, by Your grace my illusion has been dispelled, and I am situated in knowledge. I am now free from doubts, and I shall act according to Your instructions.”

Lord Krishna’s words in the Gita make it abundantly clear that the heart that loves God completely and surrenders to Him, has already reached Him. Nothing more is needed. Swami Mukundananda summarizes the idea as “When you fill your heart with divine love, you become a magnet for God’s grace. That love purifies, protects, and liberates.” Love is not just about emotions—it is about action. When one serves others without expecting anything in return, that service is an expression of love. “Therefore, without attachment, perform your duty as a matter of love and devotion.” (Gita 3.19) An interesting corollary of this kind of Love is that it can be found in even the most mundane, everyday tasks. Even repetitive household chores can be a form of devotion. (Srinivasan & Aithal, 2025)

Sant Kabir

Kabir described devotion and unconditional love as an inward, transformative force that transcends religious boundaries, rituals, and the ego. He believed that true devotion is not found in temples or books but within the human heart, characterizing it as a state of complete surrender. For Kabir, the ego is the primary barrier to divine love. In one of his famous dohas, he noted that “When ‘I’ was, God was not; when God is, ‘I’ am not,” illustrating that union with the Divine requires the complete dissolution of self or ego or aham. He described love as a path where one must “cut off their head” and place it on the ground, which is a metaphor for surrendering one’s pride and intellect to experience true love.

जब मैं था तब हरि नहीं, अब हरि हैं मैं नाहिं
प्रेम गली अति सांकरी, जामें दो न समाहीं॥

Here Sant Kabir says that when his ego existed within him, God could not. Now God is, and the ego is destroyed. Love, like a narrow lane, cannot have selfishness and selflessness together. To reach God, the ego will have to be slowly dissolved. (*Doha of Kabir*, n.d.) Sant Kabir believed that seeking God externally is for people who are unwilling to surrender internally. His words taught that the Divine is always near, residing in the ‘breath within all breaths’. Which is why most saints say that we worship God ‘with every breath’. Yoga also teaches Pranayama and Asanas as a way toward Yoga, which essentially teach breath control. ‘Seek and ye shall find’ - Unconditional Love can be found in every breath.

पोथी पढ़ि पढ़ि जग मुआ, पंडित भया न कोय।
ढाई आखर प्रेम का, पढ़े सो पंडित होय॥

For Kabir, Love is the highest form of spiritual knowledge. In the above doha he says that one cannot become a pandit simply by reading scripture. However, knowing the two and a half letters of the word ‘prem’ can make one a pandit (wise man). He often used the metaphor of the soul as a

bride longing for her husband that is the Lord, depicting devotion as an intense, personal romance with the Divine. Love consumes one whole. Rumi in one of his very famous couplets remarks,

The result of my life is no more than three words,
I was raw, I was cooked, I was burned.

Love burns one. It is all-encompassing, profound and it devours a person's entire being. Every act, every breath, every motion, every being appears as the Beloved. Sant Kabir further compared the experience of Love to a person who is mute eating a sweet; they can taste its intense sweetness but cannot find words to describe it. Naturally with a love so consummate, caste hierarchies, inequalities, divergences are nullified by empathy. "The river that flows in you also flows in me".

प्रेमी ढूँढत मैं फिरूँ, प्रेमी मिलै न कोइ।
प्रेमी कूँ प्रेमी मिलै तब, सब विष अमृत होइ॥

Translation: I went out searching for a lover (a true devotee or God), but I couldn't find anyone. When a lover finally meets another lover, all poison turns into nectar."

जिस मरनै थे जग डरै, सो मेरे आनंद।
कब मरिहूँ कब देखिहूँ पूरन परमानंद॥

Translation: The death of which the world is afraid of, brings bliss to me. When will I die so that I may see and attain absolute, supreme bliss?

कबीर कुत्ता राम का, मुतिया मेरा नाऊँ।
गलै राम की जेबड़ी, जित खँचे तित जाऊँ॥

Translation: I am the dog of Ram (God), and my name is Mutia (Moti). There is a rope of Ram around my neck; I go wherever He pulls me.

तूँ तूँ करता तूँ भया, मुझ मैं रही न हूँ।
वारी फेरी बलि गई, जित देखों तित तूँ॥

Translation: By repeating 'Thou, Thou' (Your name), I have become 'Thou.' The 'I' (ego) no longer remains within me. I have sacrificed my entire being unto You; now, wherever I look, I see only You.

सात समंद की मसि करौं, लेखनि सब बनराइ।
धरती सब कागद करौं, तऊ हरि गुण लिख्या न जाइ॥

Translation: Even if I turn the seven oceans into ink, use all the forests of the world as pens, and make the entire earth my paper, I still could not finish writing the infinite virtues of God. (*Kabirdas Ke 50 Lokpriya Dohe*, 2021)

Meerabai

Meerabai described her love for God as a personal and "mad" obsession with Lord Krishna, whom she regarded as her eternal husband and only true relative. Her devotion was characterized by sweetness or conjugal love, where she saw herself as a bride longing for her husband. Interestingly, some themes are frequently repeated in all saints' characterisation of Love. One such theme is the primacy of the process over the final product. The process of 'yearning', the 'longing', the 'burning',

the ‘cultivation’ is more important than finding the Divine that is sought. It is in the seeking that we find. The path will be illuminated by the Divine, simply taking the first step is our responsibility. Meerabai’s love was radically defiant. She was a Rajput princess and had all material wealth that one could dream of. But she rejected royal luxuries, social norms, and the restrictions of widowhood to dance and sing in public for her Krishna. She described her devotion as an unbreakable bond that was higher than mountains and deeper than the ocean. To her, all other human relationships and worldly treasures were meaningless and ephemeral. She depicted her devotion as a priceless jewel found through the grace of her Guru, for which she sacrificed all worldly honor. Not only have these saints given us brilliant bhajans to sing, but also shown that Unconditional Love is not a theoretical concept. It exists in reality and it has the power to consume one’s body, mind and soul. Another theme that is frequently repeated is the importance of singing and dancing in reaching God. Rumi was strictly a scholar but after he was ‘cooked’, he danced and sang and wrote thousands of poems. Bhakti and Sufi saints alike composed verses in praise of the Lord. The Gita was also originally supposed to be sung.

“मेरे तो गिरधर गोपाल, दूसरो न कोई।
जाके सिरर मोर मुकुट, मेरो पति सोई॥”

Translation: My only Lord is Giridhar Gopal, there is no other. The one who wears the crown of peacock feathers is my husband.

“पायो जी मैंने राम रतन धन पायो।
वस्तु अमलोक दी मेरे सतगुरु, किरपा कर अपनायो॥”

Translation: I have found the wealth of the jewel of the Divine Name. My True Guru gave me this priceless thing; by His grace, I have accepted it.

“अँसुवन जल सींचि-सींचि, प्रेम-बेलि बोयी।
अब तो बेलि फैल गई, आनंद फल होई॥”

Translation: I watered the vine of love with my tears. Now the vine has spread everywhere, and it bears the fruit called Bliss. Meerabai famously abandoned the purdah and royal dignity of the Rajput court to dance in the company of saints, declaring that she had sold herself to her Lord.

“पग धुँधरू बाँध मीरा नाची रे।
लोग कहै मीरा भई बावरी, सास कहै कुलनासी रे॥”

Translation: Meera tied ghunghroo to her ankles and danced. People said she had gone mad, and her mother-in-law called her the destroyer of the family’s honor. According to legend, her in-laws attempted to kill her with poison and snakes, but her devotion transformed these threats into miracles showcasing the power of divine protection and resilience.

“विष का प्याला राणा जी ने भेजा, पीवत मीरा हाँसी रे।
म्हणे चाकर राखो जी, गिरधारी लाला म्हणे चाकर राखो जी॥”

Translation: The Rana (her husband) sent a cup of poison, which Meera drank happily as it turned to nectar. She begs to be kept as a humble servant to her Lord. A significant portion of her poetry describes the physical and mental torment of being away from Krishna, comparing herself to a fish out of water. The agony of separation is the fire that cooks/burns you. The acquaintance of Shams

and Rumi was of only 3 years and most of Rumi's poetry is written in the agony of separation from the Beloved. So much so that he named his collection of poems as 'Diwan-i-Shams-i-Tabrizi' or 'The Collected Poems of Shams Tabrizi'. Rumi even used Shams' name to refer to himself in his couplets.

‘हे री मैं तो प्रेम दिवानी, मेरो दरद न जाणै कोय।
सूली ऊपर सेज हमारी, सोवण किस बिध होय।।’

Translation: I am mad with love, and no one understands my pain. My bed is atop a stake (of thorns); how can I find any sleep? Meerabai describes her devotion as an internal, rhythmic repetition of God's name that required no external tools.

‘साँसों की माला पे सिमरूँ मैं पी का नाम।
अपने मन की मैं जानूँ और पी के मन की राम।।’

Translation: On the rosary of my breaths, I chant the name of my Beloved. I know my own heart, and only the Divine knows the heart of my Beloved. She often used nature to describe her inseparable bond with Krishna, identifying herself as the bird that seeks the moon or the fish within the lake. “If You are the moon, then I am the Chakora bird (which stares at the moon incessantly).” “If You are a lake, I am a fish within its waters.” “If You are a pearl, I am the thread that weaves it.” (Ahuja, n.d.)

Rumi and Shams

Jalal-ud-din was born in 1207 CE in the Balkh region of Afghanistan to a Muslim religious scholar Baha Walad. Over time they moved to Konya, Turkey due to Mongol invasions from the north-east. Jalal-ud-din was well taught by his father in the Quran, Sharia, Hadith etc. and was a famous preacher (Sheikh) in Konya when he met Shams, a wandering dervish. It was love at first sight. Their profound love transformed Jalal-ud-din, the rigid scholar, into Rumi, the poet, dancer and lover. Barely a few months into their acquaintance, Shams disappeared. This sent Rumi into a frenzy and he composed several ghazals due to that separation. In India, such compositions are clubbed in a genre called ‘biraha’. Rumi and Shams made the ‘Dance of Whirling Dervishes’ so often characteristic of Sufism in popular culture now. This meditative dance involves spinning in repetitive circles, symbolizing a spiritual ascent toward divine love. They called it a ‘sema ceremony’. The following poems are translations from the original Persian. The author is not the translator.

“I swear, since seeing Your face,
the whole world is fraud and fantasy
The garden is bewildered as to what is leaf
or blossom. The distracted birds
can't distinguish the birdseed from the snare”
“I am a sculptor, a molder of form.
In every moment I shape an idol.
But then, in front of you, I melt them down
I can rouse a hundred forms

and fill them with spirit,
but when I look into your face,
I want to throw them in the fire.”

Conclusion

Some other tales talk about the unconditional love between man and God. Such as the tale of Sudama. A friend of Lord Krishna from childhood, Sudama grew into poverty while Krishna became Dwarakadheesh. One day Sudama's wife asks him to meet Krishna and tell Him our plight. Embarrassed by his stature in life, Sudama initially is hesitant, but goes anyway. Upon reaching the palace Krishna comes running out and greets his old friend with a wholehearted hug. While the onlookers are shocked to see the Sovereign behave in this manner, Krishna doesn't care. He carefully brings Sudama inside and washes his feet himself. Krishna then asks him, “Have you not brought anything for your dear friend?” Sudama, the poor man, gave the little poultice of rice his wife had given him to give to Krishna. Sudama is embarrassed thinking, “Krishna is King. He must receive gold and silver. What value would He have for my poultice of rice?”. Krishna takes a single grain of rice from that poultice and eats it - and the hunger of the entire world is satisfied.

The metaphor is that of a bhakt, who, though initially wonders how he, a small poor man, can take the magnanimous journey to God, finds upon seeing the Divine, that He Himself was waiting for the bhakt. He embraces the bhakt with wide open arms and welcomes him into Himself with full honors. He also accepts whatever small offering the bhakt is able to give Him. This is not to say that the rich cannot reach God, because in front of the wealth of God, all of us are poor. The Sovereign is waiting for you, seek Him.

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