

Haripath

"Hari" means God; "path" means singing, study.

In his brief lifetime, Jñaneshwar Maharaj, (1275-1297), the great and favorite Maharashtrian saint, shared with the world some of the most inspired and beautifully written devotional and philosophical compositions ever known. He is the author of the Haripath abhangas (unbreakable devotional poems).

The Haripath consists of a series of 28 ecstatic musical poems or abhangas which repeatedly praise the value of chanting of God's names, describe the countless benefits to be gained, and gives us many insights into the correct way to live a spiritual life, a life immersed in the blissful presence of this divinity whom Jñaneshwar calls Hari, Vitthal, Panduranga, and our own Self.

When our small band of musical Bhaktas, many of us Westerners, began its humble attempt at learning and singing these traditional Maharashtrian poems, there was not a succinct, accurate English translation yet available. Verse by verse, as we learned the music and the words, Umesh and Chitra Nagarkatte feverously worked to keep us supplied with the English meanings.

Singing and contemplating each abhanga inspired us to feel their inherent joy and profound meanings. We realized that each verse had its own character and unique flavor. Though the Haripath has been popular in Maharashtra for seven hundred years and is sung daily as a spiritual practice by many people, for us it was quite new, and we began to realize what a treasure we had discovered.

Our original goal was to sing a few of the first abhangas for Gurudev Nityananda to celebrate his arrival to Shanti Mandir Walden in the summer of 2004. After listening to our modest but inspired offering, Gurudev instructed us to learn the other twenty abhangas as well. Thus this devotional expression inspired by the Maharashtrian poet saints, has evolved, through Gurudev's grace, into a widespread learning and chanting of Jñanadev's Haripath.

In addition to the many treasured texts and commentaries written by Jñaneshwar in his brief lifetime, he wrote over one thousand abhangas. Their purpose was to inspire devotion and provide easy access to subtle teachings. The Haripath was composed as a collection of verses to be sung for the praise, worship and study of the divine principle. The poems nearly all contain four lines and are punctuated with the final signature "Jñanadeva mhane" (Jñanadeva says), which invariably underscores the theme of that abhanga.

The teachings in the Haripath are simple, direct and sublime. Contained within are the essential truths taught in the Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Vedanta and Bhakti Sutras – offered to us freely, as Jñaneshwar says, "like fruit in the palm

of our hand." These profound teachings are best described by the abhangas themselves. Jñaneshwar, also known as Jñanadev, first tells us that liberation is not as far off and unattainable as we may think. In the very first verse he says, "One who stands at God's door even for a moment has attained the four-fold liberation." In verse two, he says, "Hari, the individual soul, and indeed Lord Shiva are one and the same. Don't weary your mind with difficult paths. For Jñanadev, chanting is Heaven. Through it, you will see this world densely pervaded by God."

He praises devotion as the most essential quality in spiritual life. "Oh, how quickly the deity is pleased. Remain quiet, in solitude, don't strive needlessly. With great effort you pursue your worldly life, but why are you not worshiping Hari? Jñanadev says chanting God's name will break the world's hold on you" (verse 3).

Perhaps most importantly, Jñaneshwar sings of the value of the company of the Saints and the Guru. "Whoever attains the understanding of the saints loses his separateness. It dissolves into the experience of the Self – just as when lighted camphor flames away and ends then and there leaving no trace. One flourishes in fortune in the territory of liberation, when he becomes God's devotee in the company of the saints." (verse 6).

Many of us were fortunate enough to have sat with Baba Muktananda and listened to his nightly spiritual discourses. We can recall him lovingly referring to the great poet saints of Maharashtra. He told us the stories of Jñaneshwar, Tukaram, Eknath, Namdev, Janabai and others and he sang their abhangas with great love and joy. Through his nectarean words he granted us access to their time, their devotion and their eternal wisdom.

We are immensely grateful to his successor, Mahamandaleshwar Swami Nityananda, for lighting a blazing fire of Haripath chanting in the Shanti Mandir Community. We feel ourselves being swept away by that same joy that Baba shared with us. Thus the small offering made at the feet of Shree Gurudev has reaped for us the immeasurable reward of greater devotion.

Singing the Haripath with Gurudev is like a visit to Pandharpur itself. We feel we are sitting before the images of Lord Vitthala while Rukmini, Tukaram, Namdev, Eknath, Sopan, Muktabai, and Jñanadev himself, are swaying, dancing, clapping their hands, laughing, crying with devotion, and congratulating us for stepping through the veil of the mind into the boundless world of singing the names of God; in the company of the Saints. Perhaps, after only one such ecstatic session, we are likely to walk away swaying and smiling, as we continue to hear Jñanadev's wonderfully haunting refrain, Hari mukhe mhana, Hari mukhe mhana, punyachi ganana kona kari" – chant Hari, chant Hari, who can count the merit to be gained?"

The last abhanga, written as the finale, is a prayer by the great 17th century Marathi poet saint Tukaram Maharaj. In it, Tukaram extols further the greatness of keeping the company of the saints. It is sung as the final Haripath abhanga by some Vaikaris in Maharashtra and we have chosen to include it in our chanting as well.