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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Yours Affectionately

A Letter from Maharaj Sawan Singh

It is not difficult for the Master to take a soul upward, but premature uplifting causes harm. Just as a fine silk cloth, when spread upon a thorny hedge is torn to pieces if suddenly pulled away, so too the soul, entangled in the thorns of karma, which penetrate every cell in the body, must be gradually purified by the Master's love. By his grace, the soul is freed from these thorns and the karma is slowly sifted out from every cell in the body.

You will get everything you wish – things more wonderful and remarkable than you ever dreamed of. He who has to give you all, is sitting inside, in the third eye. He is simply waiting for the cleanliness of your mind and watching your every action.

The repetition of the Names should be performed with love and faith. Fix your attention in the eye centre (without putting any pressure on the eyes), and keep in one position, if possible, so that you become unconscious of the body below the eyes, and the attention does not wander from the eye focus.

Try to enjoy the exercise.... There is no doubt we are weak and have neither faith nor love, but there is also one hope to sustain us – that he may take pity on us and forgive our sins. We have taken refuge at his holy feet and, deservedly or undeservedly, we are his children. Therefore, it behooves you to perform your devotions every day, without fail. Do not engage in discussions with others, but go on pursuing the path while attending to the daily business of life, with peace and precaution. The Master is ever ready to help his children.

Spiritual Gems



Life

A disciple once confessed to her Master that at one point in her life, she had loved him intensely, but with the passing of time she no longer felt that way anymore. Tears filled her eyes as she further questioned whether she had ever truly loved him at all, because she knew that real love is supposed to be everlasting. With much compassion, the Master explained to her that she had not stopped loving her Master, but that 'life' had simply gotten in the way. Life?

Yes, life. It happens to us all. Certain life-altering events hit us like a powerful storm that shakes us at our very core. Marriage, the birth of a child, moving to a new city, or even that crucial project at work, are examples of circumstances that can uproot our daily lives. Unfortunately, no matter how joyous or fulfilling, such life-altering events often have the effect of disrupting our daily meditation practice. A new mother who gets up every few hours to nurse her baby, or a young associate who works through the night to close a deal, or a Ph.D student working tirelessly to complete his thesis on time, may all find it practically impossible to adhere to their meditation schedules. When faced with such challenges, some disciples may resort to shortening their allotted meditation time, while others may stop meditating altogether.

Life spares nobody. The demands of life affect even very disciplined souls. While still in the monastery, the author of *Adventure of Faith*, a nun, explained how she had gotten completely consumed by the task of designing and manufacturing a whole set of pontifical vestments:

The execution of this project demanded an effort that absorbed all my time and energy for about a year and a half, and I was literally unable to think of anything else. I followed the

communal prayer mechanically and I practically gave up my personal prayer, so that the inner contact with God loosened more and more. The divine horizon in my life had vanished and the world of faith hardly touched me anymore....

Many of us can relate with the sentiments expressed by the author. Eventually though, life settles down for all of us. However, having neglected our meditation practice for so long, turning towards God again may seem like a foreign task. The idea of sitting still in silence for two and a half hours appears intimidating. In fact, to meditate for even just a few minutes can be so difficult. For many of us, it took years to build our meditation practice and we feel as though we now have to train our mind and body all over again. This author also expressed such sentiments once her project was finally completed in the summer of 1962:

In the summer of 1962, the project was completed and I found myself in the ruins of my spiritual life. Filled with horror, I stared into the burnt-out place that once had been a God-loving heart.... I was paralyzed and knew that a new beginning was impossible. I had neglected Him too much.... At that time, I found myself incapable of a single thought that might bring me close to God again.... My reckless ambition had destroyed everything that had developed in all those years since my first encounter with God.

Where do we start to pick-up the pieces of a shattered spiritual life, or even better, prevent life from getting in the way again? The Master has often told us that meditation is our 'life support system', but when we have been unplugged for so long and are completely drained of

spirituality, from where do we get the initial boost required to get back on track?

The good news is that meditation is like riding a bicycle; we never completely forget what we have learnt. The skill remains ingrained in us – however, if we have not ridden in a while, our body and mind will undoubtedly wobble when we initially try to ride and balance again. But with practice and perseverance, little by little, we must continue to call out to the Lord for his mercy and grace through meditation – for the Lord alone can rescue us and restore us to a ‘life’ with him. “I need your grace, to remind me to find my own” becomes our sincerest request “so that no matter how intrusive ‘life’ may get, I shall never let go of your hand again.”



*Do not be disheartened with your imperfections,
but always rise up with fresh courage.
There is no better means of attaining to the spiritual life
than by continually beginning again.*

Saint Francis de Sales, as quoted in
The Complete Guide to World Mysticism

Something to Think About

The astral form of the Master is so radiant, beautiful and magnetic that, after seeing it, one does not find any form or figure as beautiful in this world and so gives up all worldly attachments. A deep consuming love for the Lord and a burning pang of separation from him are most essential for his darshan. The fire of love burns away all impurities. Only the desire to meet the Beloved remains.

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

* * *

If anyone should ask what there is in the Shabd that makes it the only power that can control the mind, the reply is that the sweetness of the Shabd far exceeds all pleasures of the world, including those of lust, which are given such prominence in the world today. When the soul enters that world of immortality, the creation there is so wonderful that everything of this world then appears no more than filth. The mind then automatically leaves the pleasures of the senses, and once it does this it is under one's control. According to the teachings of the saints, the only object of man's coming into this world is to get into contact with the Shabd, the sound current, which is within us.

With the Three Masters, Vol. II

* * *

Serenity and tranquillity are positive virtues, and a serene and calm mind has much more power than a turbulent, vindictive mind. Temper influences temper. That is why so great an emphasis is laid on good company. Even wild beasts calm down when they come across a serene mind. Goodness is its own reward.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

In His Footsteps

A satsangi's daily conduct must bear the hallmark of excellence and must reveal that he is the follower of a true Master.

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

When we read about the lives of the spiritual Masters, we observe how they conducted themselves in accordance to the teachings of the path. Always a kind word, a sense of humour even in the most tense of situations, spreading love wherever they went, and generally following their own Master as they continued to spread the teachings.

Sometimes when we admire a child whom we find to be very disciplined, well-mannered and kind, we ask about his parents, because we are curious to know who could have raised a child with such good virtues. Some of us may even go a step further and praise the parents.

As disciples of a perfect living Master, we have a responsibility to be like that child. How often does our behaviour or our attitude raise questions about who our Master is? Do we, in our everyday actions, reflect the teachings of Sant Mat?

Just like the Masters, do we see the Lord in everyone, or are we quick to judge and criticize others? When an unkind word is said to us, do we ignore it and forgive the other person, or do we respond with unkind words in return? Do we try our best to keep the harmony and peace around us, or is our ego always at the forefront demanding that we get our way?

In *Legacy of Love*, there is an interesting anecdote written about Maharaj Charan Singh:

Wherever Maharaj Ji went, people noticed him and asked who he was. Yet he never sought attention. The fact was that his dignity and noble bearing combined with gentleness and good humour in such an extraordinary way that people were drawn to him as to one who possessed a unique and precious treasure. On many occasions – in restaurants, in hotels or even on the street – people asked whether he was a ‘maharaja’.

Just as strangers were drawn to the unique presence of Hazur, so should we strive to attain this quality. Sure, we may feel that he was a Master, and we are merely disciples who are struggling on the path. Yet, as disciples we should aim to walk in the footsteps of the Master; that is, to be like him, and to do our best to live according to the teachings. We should learn to live our everyday lives in such a manner that eventually our entire being becomes an expression of Sant Mat. The question is: how do we go about doing this?

A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.

Confucius

What is the step that we can take which will help us eventually be like our own Master? Our journey begins and ends with one word: meditation.

When we take that step to ensure that we are doing our very best in order to complete our daily meditation with utmost love and devotion, then we will begin to notice the change in ourselves. That is when we will be ‘living the teachings’ in the truest form.

We have heard in satsangs how the Masters consider their disciples to be their legacy. It is now up to us to decide whether or not we would like to live up to that. Just as an obedient and loving child is the pride and joy of every parent, so too is an obedient disciple the pride and joy of his Master.

Walking in the 'footsteps of the Master' means that whatever teaching the Master has given us, we have to follow it. We have to adhere to those teachings, live that way of life and attend to our meditation. That is walking in the footsteps of the Master.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*



It is a law of spirituality that if a disciple takes one step on the path indicated by the Master, the Master takes a hundred steps to meet him.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. III*

Did You Know?

Black magic cannot do anything to a satsangi. Black magic cannot influence those who are devotees of the Father. It is people's own minds which are creating disharmony, not black magic.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*

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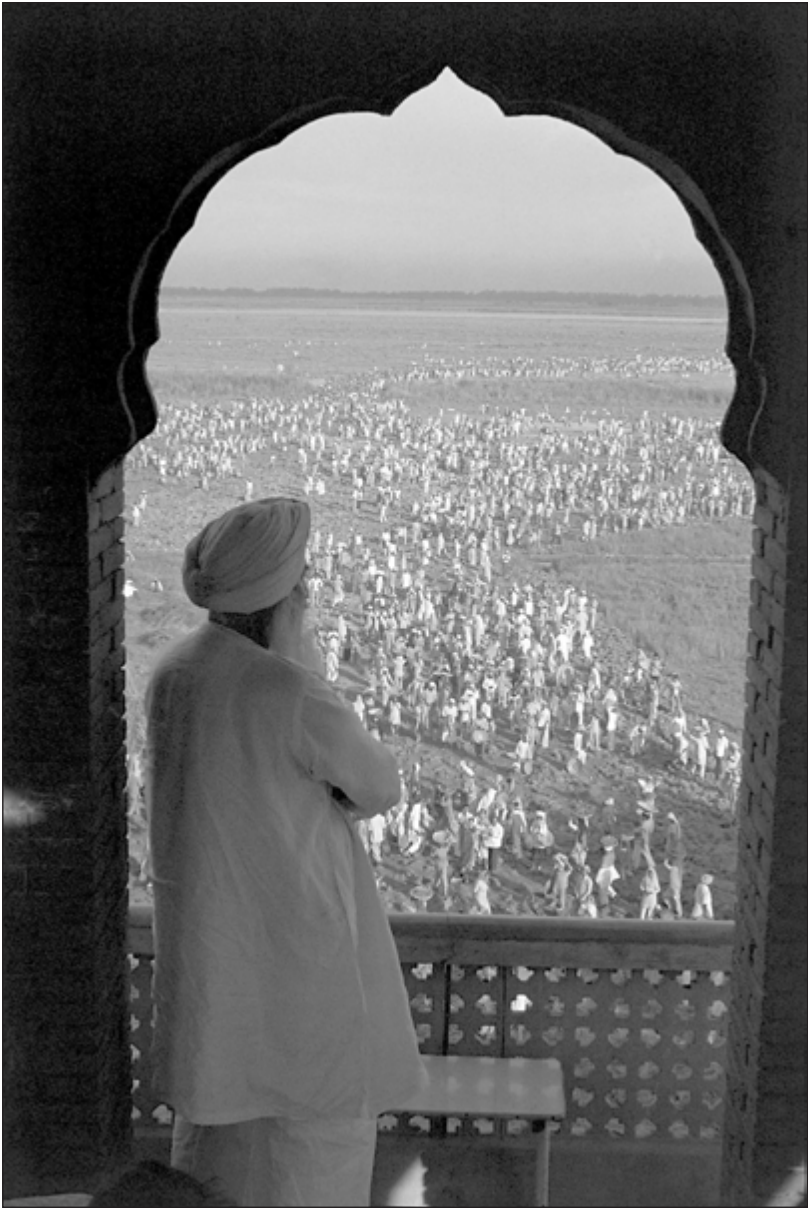
Only that which is written on my forehead will be given to me; nothing more is to be desired. Whatever worldly work the Satguru considers appropriate, he will do it well. Do not worry about it at all. You must realize that with each and every breath he is always by our side.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Letters*

* * *

Love for the Master comes by having darshan inside, that is, by seeing him inside. It is only then that the feeling of real love springs up. In the beginning, we have to practise it more or less. If we carry out his wishes and commands and follow his instructions faithfully, a feeling of confidence and love springs up; and it also leads to darshan inside, which further promotes and strengthens this love.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Light on Sant Mat*



Maharaj Charan Singh at mitti seva

To Serve the Master

O fount of eternal love, what may I say of You? How can I forget You, who have deigned to remember me, even after I was corrupted and lost? You have showed mercy on Your servant beyond all my hope; You have given grace and friendship beyond all my deserts. What return can I make to You for this grace? ... And is it a great thing that I should serve You, whom all creation is bound to serve? It should not seem much to me that I should serve You; rather it is great and wonderful to me that You should see fit to receive in Your service one so poor and unworthy, and count him among Your beloved servants.

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

As we grow on the spiritual path, many of us develop a keen desire to serve the Master. With the overwhelming love and encouragement constantly showered upon us, we long to offer something in return – however little it may be. Serving our Master is our small way of expressing our love to him.

In the above quote, Thomas à Kempis conveys his gratitude with profound humility – a potent reminder of how truly fortunate we are, that in spite of our heavy load of sins and our unworthiness, the Master grants us the privilege of serving him.

The mystics have often described serving the Master, or *seva*, as a gift. Apart from helping us control the mind, it diverts our attention from the material world, and keeps us focused on our spiritual goal. We learn to imbibe the virtues of humility and compassion, and perhaps, most importantly, we become truly aware of our insignificance. We realize that without the Master's guidance and grace, we actually cannot achieve anything.

Although there are several types of seva that we can participate in, such as seva with the body, seva with the mind, and seva with wealth, the Masters have always emphasized that none of these can ever take the place of the most important service – seva of the soul.

You cannot serve the Master in a better way than by following his instructions and living his way of life – attending to your meditation. That is the best service to the Master. You have seen the gardener working harder on the trees that don't yield any fruit, than on those trees which yield fruit. Those which yield fruit are actually helping the gardener by not demanding much of his time. They are serving the gardener. And those which don't yield any fruit at all, are making him work harder and harder, more and more. So we can serve the Master by following the teachings, and by living the teachings, thus bearing the fruit for which this human birth has been given to us.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

Wanting to serve the Master sincerely, means living in obedience to his will. It is when we carry this attitude of wanting to please him at all times that we show him the depth of our commitment to the path. The Masters continually remind us that meditation is our life support system. It is also the way by which we help the Master accomplish the task of ending our sentence in this otherwise endless prison of birth and death. Through meditation, we invoke his grace to burn the karmas that stand in the way between the Lord and us.

We can only look to the Masters as perfect examples of true servants of the Lord. Out of deep love for their Master, they go through all kinds of hardship to ensure that each and every soul under their care is taken safely back to the Lord. Christ has said, "I lay down

my life for the sheep.” And each of us has seen evidence of this as we watch the Masters give their lives to their sangat in order to achieve that one goal: union with the Supreme Lord. It is only by serving our Master, in the way that pleases him the most, that we can truly express our deepest gratitude for everything he does for us.



All that I have is Yours ...

Yet, it is really You who serve me, rather than I You ...

What return can I make for all these countless favours?

If only I could serve you faithfully all the days of my life!

If only I could render You worthy service, even for a single day!

You are truly my God, and I Your poor servant,

who am bound to serve with all my powers,

nor should I ever weary in Your praise.

This is my wish and desire;

whatever is lacking in me, I pray you to supply.

Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ

New Beginnings

A wilting rose, wrinkling skin, greying hair – all these remind us of one of life's most painful truths: impermanence. Death is a fact of life which we can never escape. It happens to everyone – family members, relatives and friends. Yet, we remain in ignorance and self-denial.

Why? Perhaps because we are afraid to step out of our comfort zone, preferring to live in an illusion where we feel time is never-ending.

Life has many phases, each of which must end in order to give way to the next. Endowed with a human body whose main purpose is to realize God, we find ourselves surrounded by a myriad of worldly distractions, and soon forget the reason of our existence. The external trappings of life are like quicksand that we sink deeper and deeper into, becoming attached to our body and considering it our own – we lose sight of our true identity. Saints often tell us to be attached with a detached attitude – a difficult feat to accomplish when we are thrust into a world teeming with new discoveries every day. Our mind is fickle. When our hair turns grey, we go to a beauty salon and apply chemical products to look younger – never mind the harmful effects they may cause to our health. When we see wrinkles and sagging skin, we turn to anti-aging creams and resort to artificial methods to avoid looking old. When our eyesight dims, we prefer to wear contact lenses instead of glasses – we do anything and everything in an effort to retain our youth.

Modern age, science and technology have opened so many new doors of innovation. Man has gone to the moon and back, and made phenomenal headway in cryogenics, robotics and cloning. But, in spite of this knowledge, science has never been able to conquer death.

Our human existence is but a brief sojourn, our passage on this earth is temporary. We are in transit, endlessly waiting to board the final leg of our journey back to our soul's real home.

It is necessary, therefore, to let go and move forward – face our fear of the unknown and break out of the shackles of this physical existence. We are fortunate to be blessed with the guidance of the perfect Master. As we persevere in our simran and bhajan, the seed of Nam that he has planted within us will blossom, and he will guide us through. Where love exists, so does obedience. By adhering to the path he has set out for us, and sincerely dedicating ourselves wholeheartedly to our duty, we are working towards a smooth transition.

A wilting rose, wrinkling skin, greying hair – every experience and every relationship comes with an expiry date, and in the end we cannot take anything with us – not even our own body. But come to think of it, what is wrong with endings? Ultimately, if we sincerely practise the Master's teachings, we are preparing ourselves for a new beginning – to become one with him forever.



Death is not to be feared. It is only the name given to the phenomenon of the soul leaving the body. After discarding the physical body, the soul ascends to the astral, causal and higher regions. Death is merely the withdrawal of the soul from its gross coverings and its entrance into finer regions. It is merely giving up the present garment, namely, the body. It does not mean annihilation. There is life after death, although we may not be able to see it.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*

Retracing Our Steps

This life is but a link in an infinite chain of existence. The body perishes but the soul lives on – immortal, treading the path back from its painful separation to its blissful return to the mansions of the Lord.

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

In the outer world, we are so caught up in duality, in separation from the Lord, that we are oblivious to our soul's innate hunger for oneness. We have forgotten that we belong to God, forgotten our source, our true home. This state of forgetfulness is intensified by our association with a deeply individualistic mind and the coverings of a material body. So dense are these coverings that we are no longer aware of the divine and loving presence that dwells within us – supporting, surrounding and sustaining our existence.

Separation from the Lord is the origin of all pain and misery. At some point, the suffering becomes so intense that we cry out, often unconsciously, for help, for mercy, for anything to alleviate the pain. We feel the pangs of separation and become anxious to return to our source. This feeling is one of the greatest boons we have been granted. It is because of the Lord's grace and mercy that he puts us in touch with a perfect living Master and brings us back home.

Were it not for his grace, we would never even think of our separation from him, nor would we desire to return home. But for his grace, we would neither meet the Master nor follow the path.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

The Master is an indispensable companion to the spiritual traveller. The Lord has placed Nam or the Word within us, but the key lies in the hands of the Master. He is the link between God and man, and plays an imperative role in unlocking the door to divinity. It is out of his infinite love and kindness that the Master bestows the gift of Nam – a gift that is absolute and eternal. One is then freed from the cycle of birth and death and from the clutches of the negative power. At the time of initiation, the Master imparts the technique of connecting our soul to the sound current within and guides us to our final abode. It is only after being accepted and initiated by a perfect Master that we begin our journey home.

When treading the path, we realize how the outward-directed activity of the mind conceals from us the brilliance and vitality of our soul. The mind and its downward tendencies trap the soul in this physical creation. The way to break free is to empower our soul by controlling our mind so that it becomes the servant and ally of the soul, not the master. This by itself is no easy task. Controlling the mind is a difficult thing to achieve. It involves hard work, persistence and sacrifice. It is for this reason that the spiritual path has often been compared to a two-edged sword or as walking on a tightrope. It requires consistent effort, courage, as well as one-pointed love and devotion to the Master – just like a moth for the flame.

*Look thou to the daring of the moth, O thou ignorant one;
Burn thyself like the moth, if insight dost thou desire.*

Bu Ali Qalandar as quoted in *Mysticism, The Spiritual Path*

When we meditate sincerely with our heart filled with love and longing, we fulfil our purpose of being born in this world. A devotee's intense love and longing for the Lord can never go unfulfilled; it is

always rewarded with the bliss of union. But what should we do if our hearts are devoid of any love or longing for the Lord? The answer is more meditation. Meditation is where we will find the depth of love that will lead us to our source. It is the only way to invoke his grace and win his love. Though it is not easy, we cannot abandon hope, nor can we think that we cannot meditate or that it is impossible to concentrate.

The Master loves our effort and struggle. Every ounce of effort helps us inch forward to him. We need to jump into the cycle of effort and grace so that the more effort we put into our meditation, the more grace he showers upon us. Meditation helps us to slowly retrace our steps back home, and it is through the Master's grace that we become closer and closer to our Beloved – so close until there is finally no separation. The lover becomes lost in love and merges into the Beloved.



*After endlessly burning in separation's flame,
I have reached the cool ocean of love and bliss.
Says Kabir: Through the Master's mercy and grace
Misery has ended, the bane of delusion has gone.*

Kabir, The Weaver of God's Name

Living a Moral Life

An Explanation by Maharaj Charan Singh

If we don't have good moral character outside, we can never make progress within at all. There are so many temptations within. If you are weak outside, you'll be more miserable and weak within: you'll never be able to make much progress. Then, if our attention is always dropping to lower centres, it is difficult to withdraw our consciousness up to the eye centre. Unless we lead a good, clean life, and unless we are able to concentrate here at the eye centre, we can never make progress at all.

And we are also sowing seeds. Christ made this very clear in the Bible when the people were about to stone a lady who committed adultery. Of course he saved her, but he advised her also: "Go, and sin no more." And to the man whom he cured, he said: "You have become whole; go, and sin no more, lest a worse thing come unto thee." You must abstain from all these things, and since you have been put on the path, you have the opportunity to become whole now. And "a worse thing come unto thee" means you may have to come back to this creation again to pay for all those karmas if you don't abstain from these acts.

Die to Live



God is the only possession who can assure our happiness. Wisdom then is the knowledge of God, and this wisdom cannot be attained at one stroke. What is needed is a rigorous discipline, a regulated mode of life, moral order, and moral and intellectual studies. We must live rightly, pray rightly and study rightly.

Saint Augustine, Lover of Truth

Smell the Roses

Life has become quite hectic these days. Everyone is racing against the clock with a schedule, a plan and a list of things to do. It is almost as though the fast forward button of humanity has been activated and everyone is thinking, working and accomplishing things at twice the normal speed.

Multi-tasking has become the new norm. And there are all kinds of gadgets and contraptions that make this way of life absolutely entertaining. Just imagine, while travelling on a train, one can listen to a favorite song on an MP3 player, respond to emails on a smartphone, and chat with one's children, spouse and friends all at the same time! It is incredible how modern technology has enabled man to make use of every second of the day. But, at what expense?

As seekers on a spiritual path whose main objective is to still the mind through the practice of one-pointed meditation, this twenty-first century lifestyle is leading us in the opposite direction. With so many distractions at our fingertips, the mind is perpetually churning thoughts, resulting in a kind of mental motion sickness afflicting the already struggling disciple. For how can a mind that is high-strung and excessively active during the day become still during meditation?

It must be emphasized that it is not technology nor modernization that is at fault here. In the hands of a criminal, a gun is considered an assault weapon, but in the hands of a policeman it could very well be a lifesaver. Similarly, technology provides us with all kinds of devices to make life easier and simpler so people can have more time to themselves. The problem stems from human weakness and man's inability to control and discipline the mind.

Sant Mat literature is full of letters from disciples asking the Masters for advice on how to still the mind during meditation. In their response, the Masters explain that it is simply a question of training, discipline and habit. First and foremost, they explain that the mind is like a wild horse and as such, it has to be trained. If we don't put in any effort towards controlling it and we indulge its every whim, then that is the kind of mind we will have to deal with.

They also compare the mind to a computer and explain that whatever data you put into it will be exactly the same data you get out of it. So, if we input data of the physical world, the mind will collect impressions of material things. If we input data of spirituality, the mind will collect impressions of subtle things.

It is, therefore, logical to conclude that concentration in meditation is directly related to how the mind is being trained in everyday life. If one is constantly multi-tasking and saturating the mind in worldly activities day after day, then one would definitely reap the result of that during meditation time.

In its natural condition, the mind is already used to jumping from one object to another. When it is indulged even more, then at the time of meditation, it gets tossed about like a ship on a stormy sea and concentration becomes impossible. In fact, it is at that time that we realize how it is actually our own actions that stand between us and focused meditation.

Sant Mat teaches us that in order to achieve concentration in meditation, the mind needs to be engaged in persistent and constant simran during the day – whenever the mind is free. But these days, when is the mind ever free?

Acknowledging our present condition, the mystics give us practical advice that can be of tremendous help. It is something that people used to do back in the days when life was simple, but have perhaps

forgotten in the hustle and bustle of today's busy lifestyle. The Masters refer to it as the art of doing nothing.

Essentially, it means, to literally practise doing nothing. Like sitting in a car and just looking out the window; or having a meal with our family where everyone sits down together, eats and enjoys each other's company. It means pacing ourselves – attending to one thing at a time and allowing ourselves some time to smell the roses.

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.*

William Henry Davies

By creating that little bit of mental space, we appreciate everything around us and savour the moments of our lives. But most importantly, we learn to live in a state of awareness and experience, instead of being engrossed in our own neuroses and letting all the best parts of life pass us by.

The mystics say that by living this way, we will be less attached to worldly goals and outcomes, and will feel lighter. Eventually, it will become easier to let go during meditation time and this will be a great help in achieving our goal of focused meditation.

We all live under so much pressure these days that we are always in need of some kind of stress relief. The best source of relaxation comes from quieting the nerves through the blissful solitude of focused meditation. Just as sleep and rest are indispensable to the physical body, so too is that one-pointed attention in meditation indispensable to one's spiritual welfare.

Focused meditation helps us live focused lives. We are able to think clearly and pursue our goals with a definite sense of direction. We recognize the difference between necessity and indulgence and conduct ourselves accordingly; we learn to prioritize and attend to what is most important.

Ultimately, meditation helps us achieve a state of balance so that we can handle everything that is required of us without losing our focus. It allows us to do both our spiritual work and our physical work in a simple and relaxed manner giving us plenty of time along the way ... to stop and smell the roses.



Ask anyone, and you will find that no one has any free time....

What is the point of progress if we do not get an hour to ourselves, or even half an hour to relax? Tension is written on everybody's face, no one appears relaxed, and even a handful of people cannot sit together and laugh and play. So what advantage are we getting from progress?

It is not that there is anything wrong with development in itself; what is wrong is that we have become slaves to these things. They were made for our benefit, not we for theirs. We have become like components in these machines; we have failed to be their masters.

We should take control of development.... There should be unity and peace in the family; children should show respect to their parents, and parents should love their children. We should be sympathetic and helpful to others.... At no cost should we compromise with the basic values of human life. When basic values are lost, how can material progress be of any benefit to us?

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Discourses, Vol. II*

The Master Answers

A selection of questions and answers with Maharaj Charan Singh

Q: *When a strong desire to do service awakens in a disciple's heart, should he think only of turning that service to simran and bhajan?*

A: No, whatever service he's capable of doing, he can do. Of course, the best service is bhajan, but there are other services also which are strong means leading to bhajan. To train the mind to live in the will of the Father is also a service.

Q: *How do we do that day by day?*

A: We have to face situations at every step of our life, and at every step in this life we have to explain to our mind, "You have to accept whatever comes in your fate and accept it smilingly and cheerfully. Why grumble?" It's a constant training of the mind. This is also doing service, because that will help us in meditation. If we always feel perturbed with every little thing, then how can we concentrate, how can we meditate? If we make every little thing an issue the size of Himalayas, then how can we concentrate? We have to forget, we have to forgive, we have to train our mind to take things easily, lightly, to laugh them away, ignore them. This is all training the mind.

Die to Live

* * *

Q: *Can the intellect ever fully understand the teachings of Sant Mat?*

A: No. I would say to understand the real teachings of the saints is to experience them.

The Master Answers

Q: *Master, can one be too serious about Sant Mat? I find it difficult at times to laugh at certain things where other people can laugh at them.*

A: We should be serious about following Sant Mat, but that doesn't mean that we should disregard the cheerful side of life altogether. Rather, we should feel more relaxed because we are following the path. Concentration helps you to get rid of all your tensions. Meditation will help you to rise above this feeling of tension or remorse, or any miserable feeling.

Die to Live

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Q: *Maharaj Ji, it seems clear that the lover needs the Beloved. Does the Beloved have any need of the lover?*

A: Yes. Who gives the love to the lover? It is the Beloved who gives love to the lover. The lover thinks he loves the Beloved. The pull in the lover's heart comes from the Beloved always. It gives the feeling to the lover that he is in love with the Beloved. Actually, it is the Beloved who has put that pull in the lover's heart. Without that need, why should the Beloved give that pull to the lover? Why should he create the seed of love in the lover's heart? The Beloved must be needing that love.

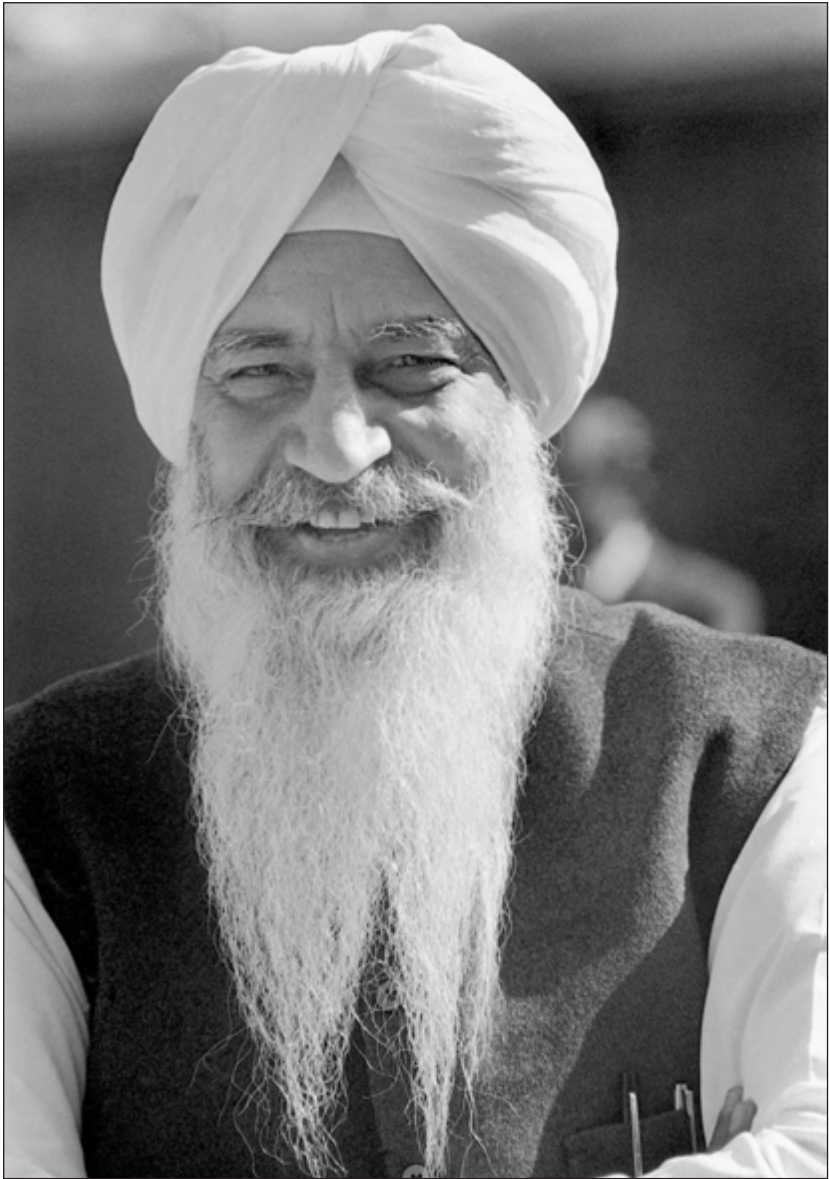
Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

* * *

Q: *I was wondering if it is right to give money to people; how should we give, and to whom?*

A: There's no harm in giving money in charity to deserving institutions, to deserving people; helping people who are really in need. But giving to those people who will use it for drugs or drinks, who will just waste money in sensual pleasures, is no good at all.

Thus Saith the Master



Maharaj Charan Singh

Forever His

*When you feel lonely,
when you feel unwanted,
when you feel sick or forgotten,
remember you are precious to Him.*

Mother Teresa, *No Greater Love*

There are times when we feel very lonely and wonder why we have this feeling when we have been blessed by the Lord with so much. As human beings, we think: My spouse belongs me, my children belong to me, my friends belong to me, and so forth. But, just like the canvas that looks beautiful and perfect from the front but ugly and dirty at the back, we too feel miserable, confused and lost within.

Sometimes this loneliness gets to us and we do all kinds of things to overcome it. Many give in to sensual pleasures and get entangled with other worldly attachments thinking that these things will bring them relief from this feeling of loneliness.

Saints openly explain to us that this feeling of loneliness is a natural instinct of the soul towards its own source. Maharaj Charan Singh has even called it a divine law. He says:

You have everything of the world, but still you want something more. In spite of everything that you need in this world, that feeling of loneliness does not leave, and will not leave us unless the soul merges back to its own source. That is a divine law, you see.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

A disciple once asked Maharaj Charan Singh (as quoted in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*): “How should we best deal with loneliness?” Hazur replied:

Deal with it? We are all lonely in this world. It is a self-deception to think that somebody belongs to us, or we belong to somebody. It's just self-deception. The time comes when we all realize the self-deception, when we wake up from our deep slumber. We are lonely because the soul is the essence of that divine ocean, and this feeling of loneliness will never leave the soul unless it merges back into that ocean.

In everyone's life, there comes a time when one realizes that he is really lonely and that nothing belongs to him. Saints say that such an opportunity does come in everyone's life. They call it an opportunity, and as Hazur puts it: “The sooner one can rise above it and realize it, the more fortunate one is.”

This loneliness is a blessing in disguise. We cry, we weep and try to overcome this feeling, not understanding that there is a hidden depth in this loneliness. It is actually the cry of the soul to go back to the Lord. This loneliness urges us to find him, to seek him, to become his forever.

By his grace, the same feeling of loneliness – the urge to be one with him – may turn us towards the Father to overcome that loneliness. That urge is the same within every one of us. With his grace, this urge can be diverted towards him, and without his grace, this urge can lead to the vices, to the sensual pleasures, and you may be lost in the creation again.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

A child who goes to a fair while holding his father's hand enjoys everything around him – all the lights, the toys, the sweet shops – everything pleases him. But if by mistake he lets go of his father's hand, he starts crying in spite of everything that had amused him. He then realizes he could derive all the pleasures from the fair only as long as his father was with him. Without that support, without the precious companionship, everything became miserable for him.

We are in the same position. The whole creation is a miserable place for us if we are separated from the Lord. If the Beloved and the lover are separated, the lover cannot be happy no matter what you give him, no matter how comfortable he may be. What pleases him the most is being in the company of his Beloved.

If the Father has showered his immense grace on us, if we have experienced even an inkling of this feeling of loneliness, and if he is our focus, then our destination is not far away – we are moving towards our true home, to become forever his.



His guiding hand is always there. He is within us. He remains within us. We should never look to anybody else. We can get help from each other; we can get strength from each other, from his disciples or his successor, we can get a sort of strength, we can resolve our doubts, any help, but we should look only to our Master as a Master. For us he is forever. And he will remain for us forever.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *The Master Answers*

The Lighter Side of Wisdom

With his sense of humour, Sardar Bahadur Ji combined a direct, forthright manner of expression. He would clearly convey his thoughts in a few precise words. Once, the pathi was reciting a hymn which has the refrain: “Even if there is a gale or storm, hail or rain, I will go for my Satguru’s darshan.” The sangat was repeating the refrain with great fervour. It was the rainy season and suddenly it started to drizzle. Everyone got up and scurried to the verandas for shelter. Sardar Bahadur Ji, who had already arrived at the satsang, continued sitting on the dais; he smiled and said, “A moment ago there was such brave talk of love for the Guru. Now that love is drowned by a few drops of rain!”

Heaven on Earth

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When the hospital was being planned, to test the designs, Maharaj Charan Singh Ji had some full size mock-ups of the arches made on the site, and also of the jalousie, or jali – block panels above the main entrance. One of the architects was trying to explain the aesthetic approach that they were hoping to achieve. “You see, your eyes will be drawn up to the screen by the light shining through it,” he said. Then Hazur Maharaj Ji, with one of his mischievous smiles remarked, “And if you raise your eyes a little higher, then everything will be full of light.”

Legacy of Love

Accept and Surrender

And life passes us by... One day becomes one week and that soon becomes one month. Before we know it, another year has passed. We try to keep Sant Mat at the forefront in the hazy blur of our daily life. But, inevitably, the urgent crowds out the critical.

Every time we have the good fortune to see the Master, we try to re-engage in our spiritual practices with renewed vigour. But, inevitably, we find ourselves taking every shortcut available to achieve this goal. These range from squeezing in a trip to the Dera to working on some new physical seva that has been given to us. Eventually, we look back and try to gain some consolation – surely these efforts are signs that we are progressing on the path...

Sadly, however, our promise to re-start our meditation practice is safely back in the cobwebs of our mind.

What can we do to change this pattern of broken resolutions? Saints come to show us the true meaning of being a disciple. They explain that if we truly love our Master, we will have no choice but to stay in his command, his *hukam*. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

To remain in the Father's love actually is to remain in his discipline. To submit ourselves to him – that is to remain in the discipline or to remain in his love. Anything which takes us away from his love makes us undisciplined, so whatever keeps us within his love, within his devotion, that is a discipline for us that we have to follow.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II

Saints come as examples of how we should lead our lives in obedience to our Master. We remember the story of Guru Ramdas when he was a disciple. He had so completely surrendered himself to his Guru that he repeatedly built and destroyed platforms at his Guru's instructions, long after the other disciples gave up on the task.

Eventually, obedience sets us on the path of surrender. As Maharaj Charan Singh says:

To attain that real surrender, which we call sharan, we have to remain within the dictates and principles that were told to us at the time of initiation. We have to put forth our honest efforts to remain on the path, to give time to meditation.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

The *sine qua non* of remaining in the Master's discipline is to do our meditation. As we read in the Adi Granth:

*The one Name is the Lord's command;
O Nanak, the true Guru has given me this understanding.*

In the end, the depth of our obedience and attending to our meditation is a mark of the maturity of our love. Our meditation, in turn, only deepens the fabric of acceptance and surrender in our lives.

Again, we look to the Masters to provide an example of how a perfect disciple should remain in his Master's will. The Great Master expressed it beautifully in a speech given at the laying of the foundation of the Satsang Ghar in 1934:

All this development is the grace of that great Saint [Baba Jaimal Singh, his Master], it is the fruit of his meditation, the manifestation of his divine power. The farmer puts up a scarecrow to protect his field; I am a scarecrow put up by Baba Ji in his field of spiritual activity. Baba Ji is doing everything; I am only his slave and am grateful to him for appointing me as a humble servant of the sangat.

Heaven on Earth

One is reminded here of a poignant couplet by a Sufi mystic:

*Being together means not knowing
That space where I end and You begin,
Where it becomes the same
Whether I Am You,
Or You are me.*

Nobody, Son of Nobody

So when we obey, we learn to submit. When we submit, we drive out the ego and bring in our Master. The saints tell us that when our love becomes strong, all other things are driven out. Then there is only acceptance and surrender.



Hazur's Remarkable Memory

At times Masters reveal an unusual sense of recognition and understanding which draws the sangat closer to them. An incident during Maharaj Charan Singh's visit in 1962 in United Kingdom is given by a satsangi from Swaziland:

Having had a severe toothache just before the Master's arrival in England, I asked him whether satsangis should take aspirin or other medicine for the alleviation of pain. Maharaj Ji replied, "You asked that question before in a letter which I have not yet had time to answer." This was true, but until that moment I had forgotten having asked this, as the letter had been written more than three months previously. Yet the Master, who receives more than 150 letters daily, about 4,000 between the first and second asking of this question, not only remembered the inquiry but also the person who had asked it, whom he was physically meeting for the first time. This so staggered me that I nearly missed the answer! Maharaj Ji continued that there was nothing against taking aspirin or other medicine. If they relieved the pain, they were meant to do so, but if the pain was written in one's karma and was therefore inescapable, no medicine on earth would be effective.

Heaven on Earth



His Presence

The commotion of everyday life keeps whirling around us and can easily carry us away like the force of a swirling tornado. We are caught off guard by a personal crisis, a death in the family, or even natural disasters like earthquakes and floods. Life deals us many difficult challenges and curve balls.

It is easy to feel lost and inadequate in the face of such events. We hold on to our simran and trust in the Master to help us through all of this. From our limited perspective, it is hard to fathom why things happen the way they do. However, instead of over-analyzing these events, the Masters advise us to channelize our emotions towards the Lord.

Keeping close contact with the Lord helps us face the frantic fury of these events in our lives. We are reminded by the mystics that He alone is our true friend who is with us in this world and beyond.

Master doesn't ever turn his back on us. The Master is constantly helping us to rise above the weaknesses which are torturing us and making us miserable in this world.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

All these events are daily reminders to the soul, that nothing here is permanent. Nothing here brings real peace or happiness. And we can feel the Lord's presence in our life by sharing all our life experiences with him.

Although it is important to establish that vital habit of daily meditation, the Lord wants more than just an appointment in our schedule. He wants to be included in every activity, problem and

conversation. The Lord wants to be invited into our hearts and he wants us to be aware of his presence.

There is a wonderful book called *The Practice of the Presence of God*, written by a seventeenth-century French monk called Brother Lawrence, who was a humble cook in a French monastery. He was able to convert even the most regular and menial tasks like washing and cleaning into acts of service for the Lord. He explains in the book that the key is not changing what we do, but in changing our attitude.

Baba Jaimal Singh also advised that it is important to keep the Master as our focus in whatever work we do:

All work is his work; remain happy wherever he keeps you, and take on whatever work you do as the Satguru's work....

The worldly obligations you are fulfilling are all essentially spiritual. Do not allow the self to intrude; everything is the Satguru's work.

Spiritual Letters

Similarly, in *The Book of Mirdad* it is written that our every thought and word should be a prayer to the Lord. All our actions in life should be lived with love and devotion for the Lord. Maharaj Charan Singh explains the text from *The Book of Mirdad* as follows:

What Mirdad means is that our whole life should be a prayer. There's no question of devoting half an hour or an hour of praying to the Lord – our whole day should be passed in prayer, in devotion and love for the Father. Prayer means just to live in love and devotion for the Father. That's constant prayer. No

particular words are required; no set prayers are required to be repeated. It should be a prayer from the heart.

Die to Live

Today we often feel we need to ‘get away’ from our daily routine in order to achieve this, but that is because we have not learned to practise his presence all the time. Devotion of the Lord is not an event to attend, but a perpetual attitude. This is because the Lord is closer to us than our own breath. He is our life force, the Shabd that permeates every molecule of matter.

*The power within is not ignorant of what you are doing.
It is with you and constantly watches you and guides you.*

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

The Masters are full of love and mercy for their disciples. And just as a parent keeps a close and watchful eye on his child, the Master is closer to us than we can imagine, and he is ever watchful. We only have to acknowledge his constant presence in every facet of our lives. There are many subtle hints and nuances where it is self-evident that he has softened the blows of painful times. He is our protector and our loving Father. We only have to turn to him within, to realize his presence.



I keep myself in his presence by simple attentiveness and a loving gaze upon God, which I can call the actual presence of God or, to put it more clearly, a habitual, silent and secret conversation of the soul with God.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God*

To Realize Him

There was once a king whose prime minister was very intelligent and spiritually inclined. One day, the king asked him, “How can God be realized? I wish to see him face to face.”

The prime minister replied, “The Lord himself comes down in this world in the garb of a perfect Master and interacts with human beings. If you wish to see God face to face, search for a perfect Master.”

The king voiced his doubts, “The Lord has an army of angels and many other means at his disposal, so why would he himself come down in the form of a human being? Where is the necessity?”

“I’ll give you the answer in a few days’ time,” he replied.

The prime minister devised a plan and set out to work on it. He ordered a doll which bore a close resemblance to the king’s son. When it was delivered to him, he gave it to the son’s maid-servant with specific instructions. Then he went out to meet the king, who was taking a walk near the lake in the palace. After a while, the maid, who was carrying the doll, passed by at a reasonable distance so the king would notice her.

After some time, while engaged in conversation with the prime minister, the king heard a huge splash in the lake. He turned around, only to see the maid in total distress and ‘the child’ in the lake. Without a second thought, the king ran and jumped into the lake to save ‘the child’. As he came up panting, the prime minister asked, “Sir, why did you jump in to save the child when you have an army of guards and servants all around you?”

“How can I just stand around and watch my child drowning?” exclaimed the king.

“Your majesty, when the Lord sees his souls yearning in separation for him, he too cannot bear to see them in pain; so he himself comes down to earth in the garb of a human being.”

U-Turn

Picture yourself behind the wheel of the fancy convertible sports car of your dreams. You are driving at high speed down the highway, heading home. You are eager to get home and pack your bags so you can take off for your new beach house. You have taken a week off from work to take your family on their dream vacation. Speeding down the open road with the top down, memories of your past come to mind and you reflect upon the journey that brought you to where you are today. You are feeling good about achieving all this success and you get lost in your thoughts, making plans for the future, and so forth.

All of a sudden, you realize you missed the exit you needed to take to get back home. You are now headed in the wrong direction and travelling away from your destination. You understand that the only way to get back on course is to make a U-turn. So, you immediately slow down, pull over to the side of the road, and then cautiously make the turn. Now, you are heading towards home again and to avoid any further delay you tell yourself to stay focused on your goal, so that this time you do not miss the exit.

It would be safe to say that all of us at some point in our lives may have drifted off in the wrong direction. As human beings, we have the tendency to lose focus of our goal. Our mind gets carried away easily, and we become oblivious to the path our life is taking. It is during these times when we need to make a change, to make that U-turn in our life. For some of us this could be a very small change and for others it could be life-altering.

If our direction of travel is not towards Him, but is reversed towards the senses, we are wasting our human form.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I

We assume that worldly success is going to bring us happiness, and in pursuit of that happiness we sometimes go through life blindly, running from day to day as fast as we can, not taking into account of where we have come from, where we are or where we are going. Some may even think that since we have nothing to complain about, that we are, by default, living a happy life. But are we really happy with where we are in life? Are we on the right path and really doing everything we can to reach our destination? The only ones who can answer these questions affirmatively are those who live every day in the will of the Lord with their goal clearly in sight; those whose ambition to please their Master is expressed through their every action.

In many ways, the life we make for ourselves can be compared to building a house. Every day is another building block; every hour is a layer of bricks; and every action is a nail in the life we choose to build. At the end of the day we might want to ask ourselves, has the life we have been building turned out to be what we envisioned?

If change needs to happen then it must begin with us and us alone. God does not change, we do. His love for us has always been the same; it is our love for Him that wavers. The Masters tell us that the Lord's love and grace is always there, but it is our own weaknesses that prevent us from experiencing it.

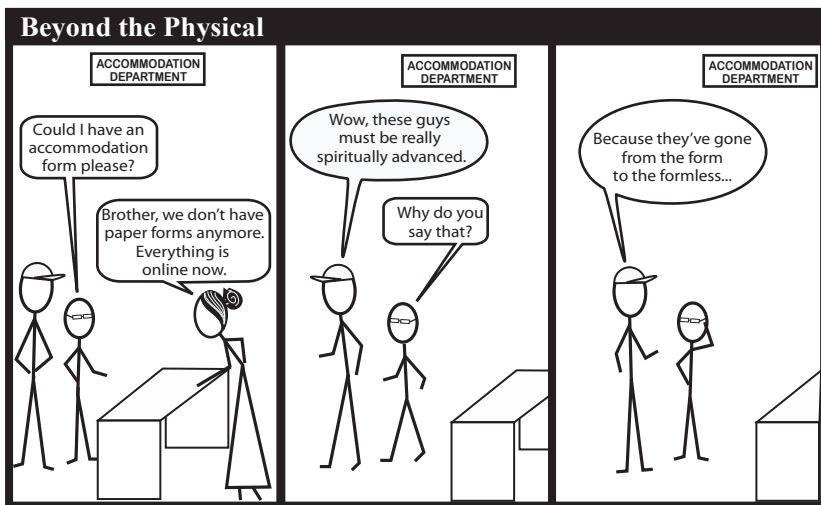
It is a source of great comfort to know that with the Lord constantly watching over us, we cannot get sidetracked for long. Our connection to Him is too powerful. The time will come when we will instinctively feel that we are off-track and when we are ready to sum up the courage; to take all the necessary measures to get back on the right path, we can rest assured the Master's grace and help will be there. All that is needed is a little effort and determination on our part.

We are fortunate to have a perfect living Master in our lives, who is always there as a source of great inspiration. The Saints give us the example of a mother and her child. When a child in distress cries for help and tries to take even a single step towards its mother, the mother drops everything and takes a hundred steps towards her child.

When that day comes for us, when we cry out for help and surrender to Him, when we want to make that U-turn so we can be closer to Him, He will take those one hundred steps towards us, lift us up in his arms and carry us home.



SPIRITUALISTICKS[®]



His Call of Love

Every aspirant on the spiritual path soon realizes that life is more than just a sum of his physical and material achievements. Being an offspring of an all-caring Father, whose imprint is stamped indelibly on the marked soul, he receives an inner calling to discover his rich heritage. This call from within comes from One who does not speak with his tongue but who speaks directly to the depths of the aspirant's inner being. This inner calling usually begins with a hint of a voice, a vision or simply a vague sense of emptiness – a void that no amount of material gratification can satisfy. By abandoning himself in love and total surrender, he begins to understand the mystery of God's existence as well as his true identity.

Setting foot on the spiritual journey with a determined heart, the aspirant undertakes to gain liberation from the clutches of the world – a journey of realization of the soul and its ultimate reality. The sincere seeker may be imperfect in many ways, but he needs only to perfect his love for God. Through the guidance of a perfect living Master, he learns the technique of penetrating the dark veils within himself. Although the journey within is not a complicated affair in itself, it requires sincere yearning, perseverance and an indomitable spirit.

The journey of the spiritual aspirant is often adorned with many trials and setbacks. The inner chatter clouds the mind, the warm embrace that was once experienced at the start of the journey is replaced by an interior coldness, and the weary spirit is filled with extreme uncertainty. Saint Thérèse of Lisieux herself encountered this vast darkness within:

*He permitted my soul to be invaded by the thickest darkness,
and that the thought of heaven, up until then so sweet to me, be
no longer anything but the cause of struggle and torment.*

Praying in the Presence of Our Lord with Saint Thérèse of Lisieux

However, it is precisely at this point of dejection that we must remember not to permit our imperfections and struggles to cripple our determination, but to travel in this stillness and rejoice in our weakness, for these inner upheavals serve a particular purpose in our eternal pilgrimage.

*When you have grown still on purpose while everything around
you is asking for your chaos, you will find the doors between
every room of this interior castle thrown open, the path home to
your true love unobstructed after all.*

Saint Teresa of Avila

The beloved Father is looking everywhere for a sincere disciple who will remain faithful and loving even when he is left alone in the wilderness. Although he sends him hardships with one hand, he sends comfort with the other. He is standing right beside him with love, forgiveness and benediction in his heart so long as the seeker stretches out his hand to reach to his. Such is his kindness and mercy that he is always ready to support the struggling aspirant.

*By practising all the virtues, keep lifting your little foot to climb
the stairs of sanctity, and do not think that you will be able to
get up even to the first step. No; but God only asks for your good
will.*

*At the top of these stairs, he (God) is looking at you lovingly.
Soon conquered by your vain efforts, he will come down
himself, and taking you in his arms, will carry you forever in his
kingdom ...*

My Vocation Is Love: Thérèse of Lisieux

The sincere aspirant, realizing his own weaknesses, and believing in the truth that strength can only be fortified by perseverance, effort and practice, will at once begin to exert himself. He begins to realize that in order to attain personal communion with God, he must not be overcome by doubts and confusion but continually stay in tune with him. Ultimately, it is grace and mercy – the mystery of God’s love – that will bring the soul back to its ultimate goal. God’s grace is abundant, and when he sees the weary soul’s sincere efforts, he will take the yearning soul back to its final destination. But the sincere seeker’s contribution to this great journey, however small, is highly significant, for it is the disciple’s effort to move towards the Lord that invokes his grace. Rumi expresses this beautifully:

*... and just the moment, when you are all confused, leaps forth
a voice, hold me close, I’m love, and I’m always yours.*

Roya R. Rad, Rumi & Self Psychology

Having attained personal communion with God, the soul then realizes that the darkness he endured within was a necessary design in God’s plan. The soul had to be purified to be prepared for the divine union. God’s love is so fathomless, boundless and inexhaustible that the disciple is caught in rapt attention in a divine experience that envelops the soul.



Heart to Heart

In a question and answer session, a disciple asked Maharaj Charan Singh, “The time for departure from the Dera is rapidly approaching, and I want some reassurance that we can take all this love with us and that this is as easily accessible at home as it is here.”

Hazur replied, “You see, our Master is within every one of us. No matter how much we try to depart from there, we can’t. So if we are carrying him with us, the question of departure doesn’t arise. Being here at the Dera, if you don’t carry him with you, it is the same thing as being away and not carrying him with you. If you are here, he is with you if you are carrying him with you; it is the same even if you are a thousand miles away, if you are carrying him with you. He is within you. So we have to carry him with us always, within us. Then there’s no departure at all. A feeling of depression shouldn’t come then because we are carrying him with us – he is with us.”

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

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In January 1947, before the Partition, when riots broke out all over India, news came to us of the terrible conditions during the forced migrations. Great Master gave the sangat instructions about living through these times: “Do not look upon anyone as your enemy. Do not let any feelings of ill will enter your heart. Love everyone and do not injure or harass anyone. Even to hurt someone’s feelings is considered a great sin in the court of the Lord.”

Heaven on Earth

Book Review



The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma

BY: GURCHARAN DAS

PUBLISHER: NEW DELHI: ALLEN LANE (PENGUIN), 2009.

ISBN 9-780-67008349-7

In this book a self-professed ‘liberal and secular’ Indian, who approaches the Hindu way of life with a ‘mixture of scepticism and sympathy’, describes his quest to learn ‘how to live a secular life in a better way’. Retired from a successful career in business, he had come to feel a certain melancholy about the state of morality in the business world in India, and in the modern world as a whole. In the spirit of the ‘third stage’ of Hindu life, in which after living a householder’s life one retires to the forest, he decided to take a two-year ‘sabbatical’ at the University of Chicago.

Oddly, given his modern liberal outlook, Western education and secular associations, he decided to pursue his quest through study of one of the founding texts of Indian religion and culture, the great Sanskrit epic the *Mahabharata*, the sprawling tale of a war between feuding cousins that has kept India and much of Asia spell-bound for two millennia. He chose the *Mahabharata* as his object of study precisely because it is “obsessed with questions of right and wrong – it analyzes human failures constantly.... In the Indian epic, harmony and happiness come to a society only through behaviour based on dharma – a complex word that means variously virtue, duty and law, but is chiefly concerned with doing the right thing.”

Studying the text with rudimentary Sanskrit skills acquired long back and with scholarly English translations, he also read widely in modern scholarship not only on the *Mahabharata* but also on Hinduism and modern moral philosophy. The result of the author’s labours is a book that brings to bear both the tales of the *Mahabharata* itself, which orchestrate, with exquisite precision, one monumental ethical dilemma after another, and the latest philosophical and scientific thinking about human morality.

The *Mahabharata* demonstrates constantly that dharma is elusive and obscure; more specifically, it is 'subtle' (*sukshma*). Dying of thirst, answering the riddles posed by a tree spirit barring his way to water, the hero of the epic Yudhishtira declares that, in seeking dharma, "Reason is of limited use for it is without foundation; neither are the sacred texts helpful as they are at odds with one another; nor is there a single sage whose opinion could be considered authoritative. The truth about dharma is hidden in a cave."

Much of the drama and poignancy of the *Mahabharata* operates precisely at the moral-ethical level, posing dilemmas that have not only no easy answers but, looked at from our level, no answers at all. Despite their uncertainties, the actors cannot evade the awe-inspiring consequences of their moral choices, paying heavily for their mistakes. On top of this, the world itself is shown to be 'uneven', 'out of joint', often dealing out bitter defeat to the righteous while richly rewarding the wrongdoers.

The author finds that the *Mahabharata* propounds and analyzes, in sophisticated fashion, most of the ethical theories now debated among moral philosophers. For example, the epic proposes the theory of utilitarianism or consequentialism, according to which one chooses that act that generates the most benefit overall: "To save the family, [one must] abandon an individual. To save the village, abandon a family; to save the country, abandon the village." This is the moral logic mostly used by those in political power. But, because it implies that ends may justify means, it can lead to abuses – as the characters of the *Mahabharata* discover to their regret. An opposing theory, more idealistic, is that of 'good for good's sake', upholding virtue in every action regardless of consequences. As Yudhishtira puts it, "I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma. I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, ... I do my duty like any householder ... I obey dharma ... not for its rewards ... but by its nature my mind is beholden to dharma."

Entwined with his explorations of moral thinking, the author, Gurcharan Das relates the potent stories of the *Mahabharata*. Early in the epic, just as Yudhishtira is to be consecrated as universal sovereign according to ancient rites, moral catastrophe strikes. A dice game must

be played as part of the ritual, but things go wrong when Yudhishtira, who has a weakness for gambling but no skill, is enticed into a lengthy game. He continually loses, but keeps on playing even though he knows his opponents are cheating. He loses not only his kingdom, but himself and his brothers and wife – all reduced to slavery. As his wife is brought into the assembly, and attempts are made to humiliate her, she cries out searing challenges to all the nobles present, on how they can explain – and justify in terms of dharma – what has happened. None can respond, and her questions resonate unanswered throughout the epic.

Eventually, after twists and turns, a great battle ensues. On the one side are the five Pandava brothers led by Yudhishtira and allied with Krishna, an incarnation of Vishnu, while on the other side are the one hundred Kaurava brothers, led by the amoral but heroic Duryodhana. At every turn, moral quandaries present themselves, and the Pandavas are often forced into moral compromises. The question is repeatedly posed: when must abstract, ideal moral principles bend? For example, should truth always be told? Yudhishtira, who is known never to lie, tells a half-truth to vanquish a rival. In another context, his virtuous uncle Bhishma declares that, while there is “nothing higher than truth, ... the thing most difficult to understand in the whole world ... is that truth should not be spoken and that falsehood should be spoken, where falsehood would be truth, and truth falsehood. Someone simple is dumbfounded in that circumstance where truth is not fixed.”

Ironically, it is often Krishna who puts an end to moral dilemmas by convincing the Pandavas to compromise their principles. Seemingly, by breaking rules, devising stratagems, and working miracles, Krishna symbolizes the transcendent dimension in human affairs, predetermining outcomes and directing human history.

The Pandava brothers do in the end narrowly prevail, but only at the cost of the deaths of nearly all their kinsmen. Their victory seems hollow, and eventually, tired of worldly pomp and power, they renounce their kingdom and start their journey towards the next world. All fall by the wayside except Yudhishtira. He trudges on, but is soon joined by a stray dog who shows him loyalty. Indra in his heavenly chariot appears to carry Yudhishtira to heaven. Yudhishtira asks to bring the dog

with him to heaven, in fulfillment of his duty not to abandon one who shows him devotion, even a dog considered religiously unclean. When told that dogs may not go to heaven, Yudhishtira refuses heaven itself in obedience to his duty. Immediately the dog transforms into the god Dharma, explaining that Yudhishtira was only being tested. Because he ‘weeps with all creatures’, he has ‘no equal in heaven.’

At the end of his book, Gurcharan Das declares that he finds in the *Mahabharata* the redeeming guidance he sought when setting out on his quest. He has learned that, for humans in an imperfect world, doing good is difficult. At our unenlightened level, our concepts, reasoning, laws, social habits, cultural conventions and religious doctrines don’t take us far. We are often forced to compromise on concepts we thought were absolute. We also carry the burden of specific obligations entailed by our roles in politics, society or family. To follow dharma, to do good, requires great diligence. On the one hand, we must interrogate our own motives, struggling to transcend our egoistic point of view. On the other hand, we must resist the opinions of others and question prevailing convention. Finally, the author argues, whether or not we believe in God or have faith in some religion or dogma makes little difference; it is a struggle either way. At our level there are no short cuts and no perfect answers.

In his final pages, Gurcharan Das chooses to focus on dharma as altruism, or in Yudhishtira’s words, “the ancient [quality of] compassion for the welfare of all creatures.” He argues that altruism is innate in human nature, even programmed in us through evolution, though following it is still a matter of individual choice. He advocates a middle path by which pragmatism and self-interest are strongly tempered by concern for others, by a desire to help all. He believes that this was the path that Yudhishtira came to in the end, and by which he earned redemption. He concludes: “Yudhishtira demonstrates that an act of goodness might be one of the very few things of genuine worth in this world.”



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