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# Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

# contents

- 4 Yours Affectionately
- 6 Happily Ever After
- 9 Something To Think About
- 10 Equanimity
- 12 A True Disciple
- 13 Spiritualisticks
- 14 Moments and Breaths Falling Away
- 17 Sweet to Me Is Your Will
- 19 Any Questions, Please?
- 22 The Master Answers
- 24 Why Marriage?
- 28 Now Is the Time
- 30 The Spark of Love
- 31 Our Best Guide
- 34 His Will
- 37 The Steering Wheel
- 39 Book Review

## **Spiritual Link**

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# Yours Affectionately

## A letter from the Great Master to his disciple

You have expressed your inner feelings so clearly. You ask, “Why did you ever accept such an individual?” Dear soul, the Master makes no mistakes in selecting persons for initiation. Only they receive the initiation whom their Maker wishes to bring back to him. He reveals the secret of the sound current to his chosen few.

The number one sign of his being merciful to anyone is that He creates in him dissatisfaction with the worldly routine and a longing to seek the truth. The second sign is that he brings him in touch with a Master. The third sign is that the Master imparts to him the secret of the sound current. The fourth sign is that the initiate works diligently and faithfully on the sound current and starts his spiritual journey. In the presence of these signs, where is the room for feeling self-disgusted?

The world is a thick forest, thickly populated, where all have lost their way and are ceaselessly and aimlessly running about, life after life, harassed by the great dacoits: lust, greed, anger, attachment and pride. The remarkable thing about these dacoits is that people associate with them joyfully and, knowing that the result of their association is suffering, have not the courage to dissociate themselves from them. They eat the poison, cry, and eat the poison again. Lucky is he who begins to understand the game of these dacoits; luckier is he who tries to dissociate himself from them; and luckiest is he who meets a master-guide and is put by him on the path of the sound current that leads him out of this wilderness to his eternal home of peace and bliss in Sach Khand.

By and by, with the increase of time in simran and the hearing of the sound current, the scattered attention will vacate the body and come in concentration in the eye centre.

So with love and faith, continue your practices; and watch that, when in practice, the mind stays inside and does not run out, and if it runs out, put it back in simran or the sound current as the case may be. Everything will turn out all right. When you notice the coming of anger, begin the repetition of the names. As your meditation will improve, the anger and ego will also disappear.

You are right when you say that the intellectual side of the science is far less important than the meditation. The whole secret – the knowledge, the substance and the cherished treasure – lies inside, and without going inside it cannot be had, and the eye that is to see it is also inside.

Reading of scriptures, discussion of philosophies, and recitation of prayers is like churning of water from which nothing but foam comes out. Going within and rising on the sound current is the churning of milk from which butter comes out. The primary effort of man, therefore, should be to vacate the body below the eyes and sit inside, in the eye centre, and dig up the hidden treasure.

The Master, from the time of initiation, is within you and watches you and gives necessary guidance, all of which you do not see. When you will go with him and cross the stars, the sun, and the moon, and meet the Radiant Form of the Master, he will talk to you as we talk to each other outside, and he will be with you always and answer all your enquiries.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*



# Happily Ever After

Fairy-tale stories have been around for centuries. A typical plot usually involves a boy and a girl falling in love and in the end, after much drama, living 'happily ever after'. Similarly, over the years we have seen many movies and read many novels with happy endings. Perhaps, such exposure may have conditioned us from a young age to aspire towards a life that would lead to our own 'happily ever after'.

This is why we search for happiness in the world around us. We pin our hopes on our spouse, our children, our relatives and even material objects to make us happy. But saints repeatedly tell us that we are looking in the wrong place. They explain that this physical world is an illusion and this human life is just a dream. Therefore, any happiness we experience here is short-lived and temporary. Sooner or later, we will have to confront pain and suffering in one form or another. They remind us that real happiness lies within, and can be realized through meditation.

One might ask, if this were true, then shouldn't every initiate of a true Master be the happiest person in the world? But, this is not the case. The sad reality is that even though we are travellers on the path to God-realization, we linger in a realm of negative thoughts.

If we were to examine ourselves closely, we would realize that most of us spend the day complaining rather than being grateful. Waking up on a rainy day, we complain how the bad weather ruined our plans. Sitting for meditation, we complain how difficult it is to curb the wandering mind. Travelling to work, we complain about our boss, how tired we are, or how horrendous the traffic is.

Perhaps we are so set in our negativity, we do not even realize it. Let's take a step back and try to see what our thoughts would sound like from another perspective. Imagine what it would be like to have a grumbling GPS turned on while driving. It's a beautiful day. The sun is out, you are relaxed, the car is packed with provisions, and you are ready to explore a new destination. But every time you reach a road junction or turn a corner, there is a complaint, a sigh or a disapproving comment from your 'Grumble Positioning System'. Imagine it saying, "Oh, what a shame you didn't turn left there," or "The café we passed an hour ago was so much

nicer than the one you are stopping at,” or “This traffic is terrible – you should have taken a different route.”

Your mood would sink in no time and you would no longer enjoy the trip. You would probably turn off the dreadful GPS and go back to map reading. Who would want to be subjected to such constant, debilitating negativity?

So perhaps we should swap our current Grumble Positioning System for a new Grateful Positioning System – a thought processing system that is positive and accepting.

Having a positive approach makes all the difference in the quality of our life. If we are able to look at every situation in a positive manner, we will be able to sit for meditation with a light and happy heart. And the more we are able to meditate, the more positive and happy our outlook becomes.

Looking at Maharaj Charan Singh for inspiration, we learn how, in every situation, he always looked for the positive. In *Legacy of Love*, we read of an incident when Maharaj Ji settled down in his seat and said, “Ah, fine weather!” His companions retorted, “How can you say that? It’s wet.” “It could be pouring,” was the optimistic reply. Throughout the trip, his companions were not allowed to say anything negative, as Maharaj Ji would immediately find something positive about whatever was going on, which would always result in a burst of laughter.

When we are positive, we recognize all the different things we have to be grateful for – no matter what our circumstances. The fact that we have been blessed with this human form and have come in contact with a true, living Master is enough reason to be thankful each day.

However, just feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like taking the trouble to wrap a gift but not giving it. The Master reminds us that the best way to express our gratitude is through sincere effort in daily meditation. When we meditate, we honour the promise we made to the Master during initiation. And when we fulfill our duty as disciples, we make the Master’s mission, easier to accomplish. What better way could there be to express our gratitude to him?

Saints remind us that this world is transient and perishable. Nothing lasts forever. Our bad times, heartache, grief are not a life sentence.

Things will get better. So why pull a long face and grumble? Why not have a positive approach and cheerfully face the ups and downs of life? When things get tough, we tend to wallow in self-pity and drown in our worries and pain. But let us reflect for a moment and focus on the irreplaceable, unfathomable, most precious gift we have received: the gift of Nam, our beloved Master and his commitment to take us back to our true home, where everlasting joy and happiness await us.

*Isn't it strange, that we are being dragged out of our fiery furnaces and smoky hell and we are being dragged into the fragrance of the eternal rose garden, and all we are doing is howling and lamenting?*

Rumi, as quoted in *Between Heaven and Mirth*

So why not strive to be happy, positive and grateful during our short sojourn here. As initiates on the path, let us be thankful for the ultimate happy ending that the Master has promised us. With his grace and mercy, one day, we will surely reach our true home. It is only a matter of time before the soul-bride reunites with her husband Lord. Together, as One, we shall, most definitely, live happily ever after.

*Immortally wedded is the soul bride who attains union with her true Lord.*

Guru Nanak, Adi Granth



# Something To Think About

Any day when you fail to keep the sacred pledge of giving two and a half hours to your meditation, please try to remind your mind that this most valuable human body was given to you by the Lord simply to afford you an opportunity to return to your original eternal home of peace and bliss. So make a renewed effort to utilize this rare opportunity of having the human form. One should never fail to render unto the Lord what is his due. Also give some time daily to the study of Sant Mat literature besides attending the group meetings that are held near you.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Quest for Light*

\* \* \*

I am sorry to know through what period of depression you are passing. Ups and downs come into the life of everyone in this world, but a satsangi, who has always the protecting hand of the Master to guide him, should never lose heart in any circumstances. You should valiantly fight the battles of life. A satsangi is never advised to run away from the world or to shirk his duties towards his family or leave his kith and kin. Try to find a good job for yourself and stick to it. We are sure to get what is our share in life. Worry never helped anybody. It does not become a satsangi to lose heart.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Quest for Light*





# Equanimity

Our soul is naturally at peace and tranquil like a serene lake. But the mind like a water pump is constantly drawing from this reservoir and dissipating its attention in all directions, creating disturbance and restlessness.

Concentrated and still, our soul is a drop of that creative power that we know as God – a power that expresses itself within us as a blissful and enchanting ringing radiance. If we could only still the mind enough to perceive this expression of our soul, we would automatically experience our reality and achieve everything that we have ever hoped for.

Unfortunately, the mind's constant search for happiness in the forms and faces of this world, which are at best uncertain, volatile and short-lived, leads us farther and farther away from the real and lasting bliss of the soul.

Given the nature of these external sources of happiness, we go through a roller coaster of emotions and states of mind that are anything but peaceful. We generally believe that anything or any situation that makes us feel sad is negative and, on the other hand, anything that makes us feel happy or hopeful is positive. In reality though, anything that excites our mind takes us away from our goal.

As practitioners on this path, what we are looking to achieve is equanimity.

Equanimity is an even state of mind, not stirred up by occurrences or disturbed by situations. It is a state of non-attachment to this world despite its ups and downs.

Let's say that we are watching a football match and we are not siding with either team. On the other hand, there is someone else sitting and watching the same game with us who is a staunch supporter of one of the teams. Imagine his state of mind and reaction to every corner, foul, penalty or goal, and then let us picture our own...

We are constantly reminded that nothing in this world is real – relationships, possessions, name and fame, all are changing facets, taking us out of one illusionary and emotional whirlpool and hurling us into another. Our endeavour is to recognize the reality of this world and understand what it is doing to us.

Retaining our equanimity is a great asset to anyone who wants to still the mind and tap into the true reservoir of happiness, peace and bliss that lies within.

Many things can disturb the balance that we are seeking. Simple thoughts, for example, can easily snowball into desires, and these in turn can completely derail us from our goal and destroy our ability to concentrate and focus. This is why we need to watch our minds and control our thoughts.

It would also help to remember that life has to happen according to our karmas, but with the grace and guidance of our Master, every event we go through can strengthen our capacity to withstand life's ups and downs. Not only that, the Master assures us that everything we must go through is for our ultimate spiritual benefit. Keeping this in mind helps us to maintain our balance so that, to a great extent, we can remain unaffected by the pain and pleasure of this world.

Practising equanimity and training the mind to remain still helps us to focus and bring our attention to the eye centre during our meditation. With all the attention gathered and whole, and the mind motionless and receptive, we will witness the grandeur of that divine ringing radiance within.

Once we are in touch with that Shabd, that ultimate source of happiness, the mind will no longer be vulnerable to the agitation of this world. There will be automatic peace and serenity, as our emotions settle, just like the calmness that descends after stormy winds subside.



# A True Disciple

On 20 September, 1947, only a few days before going to Amritsar for treatment of his illness, the Great Master set up a plan for the Dera's administration under three committees, with himself as the President and Sardar Bahadur (Maharaj Jagat Singh) as Vice-President of each committee. When he left for Amritsar, he asked all the Dera's administrators and main sevadars to continue their seva under Sardar Bahadur's supervision and gave directions that none of them should come to Amritsar.

In the first week of October, Sardar Charan Singh arrived at Dera on his way to Amritsar from Sikanderpur. He found that except for Sardar Bahadur, there was no other administrator or responsible sevar present in the Dera. Not knowing that Hazur had directed all sevadars and officials to remain at the Dera, he asked Sardar Bahadur Ji, "Why don't you come to Amritsar with me in my car? I'll drive you back here this evening." Sardar Bahadur replied, "Maharaj Ji's orders are to stay in the Dera. I cannot come with you."

Sardar Charan Singh drove on to Amritsar. He narrated his conversation with Sardar Bahadur Ji to the Great Master and informed him that Sardar Bahadur was the only sevar present in the Dera. Tears came to Hazur's eyes; he said, "Of all the people in the Dera, only Jagat Singh has obeyed me." All the other Dera administrators were in Amritsar on one excuse or another.

The next day the Great Master told Sardar Charan Singh to drive back to Beas and bring Sardar Bahadur to him, but Sardar Charan Singh said that without clear, unambiguous orders from Maharaj Ji, Sardar Bahadur would not leave the Dera. Hazur then had Rai Sahib Munshi Ram note down a letter for Sardar Bahadur, asking him to come to Amritsar. On reading the letter, Sardar Bahadur accompanied Sardar Charan Singh to Amritsar. During this short visit, Hazur arranged for all Dera bank accounts to be operated by either himself or Sardar Bahadur, or the survivor of the two.

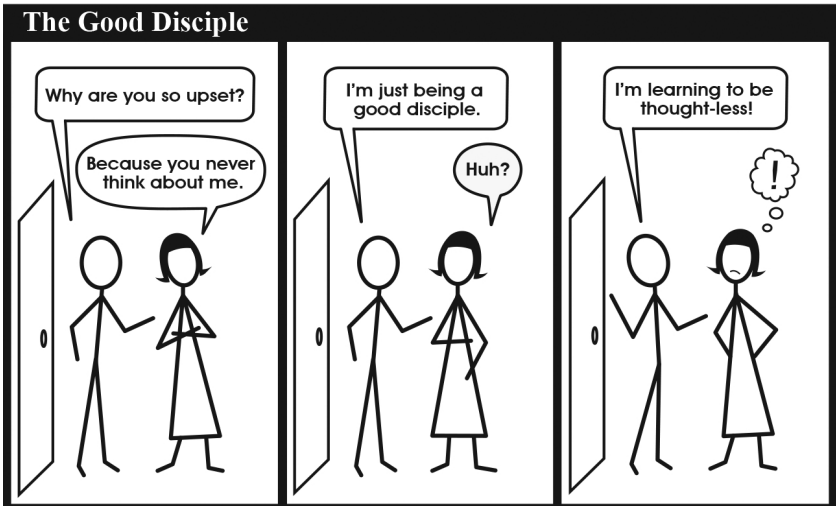
At the Dera on the 20 March, 1948, about two weeks before he was to leave us physically, Hazur Maharaj Ji summoned Sardar Bahadur Ji and

asked him to assume the burden of mastership. Sardar Bahadur replied with folded hands, “Hazur, this Emperor’s throne befits only an Emperor. May you live with us forever. I am only a slave.” Choked with emotion, he left the room. Maharaj Ji sent for him again, repeated what he had said before, adding, “These are my orders.” Sardar Bahadur bowed his head in submission at Hazur’s feet and left, tears streaming from his eyes.

*Heaven on Earth*



# SPIRITUALISTICKS®



# Moments and Breaths Falling Away

*Moments falling ... falling...  
Down and down they fall, empty of devotion.  
Breaths rise in your chest, then fall away.  
Down and down they fall, empty of adoration.  
Grains of gold, not sand, falling down and down,  
through your hourglass of astonishing opportunity.*

*The merciful one sends an endless stream of mystics  
to waken the mind of man from the dream of daily life.  
You roll over in bed and pull up your covers  
to shut out the Light shining in the voice of the saint,  
who begs you to waken and save your soul  
from the suffering of birth and death.*

*Picture now, my friend, a future you can't yet see.  
You stand in the court of consequence.  
The question has been asked,  
"How did you spend the gold you were given,  
your treasure of moments and breaths?"  
You will be reminded that you failed to honour a deal  
you signed with a saint on earth, to give ten percent  
of your time to the One who gave you everything.*

*How can even a saint plead your case,  
when you ignored the words of warning  
that fell like rubies from his lips,  
and you denied your soul her one chance for freedom?*

*Picture it now, my friend,  
your case is on the docket. What will your answer be?  
"There was so little time on earth and so many demands on me?"  
It sounded so noble then, but it's a weak defense  
here, in the court of consequence.*

*You won't mention moments lost to shady pursuits  
and pleasures, or gambling breaths on blind ambition,  
chasing the dream within a dream,  
in the game of fortune and fame.*

*In a whisper, you'll finally say, "I squandered my wealth away,  
one moment, one breath at a time."*

*Will you then fall on your knees and look up at last,  
with tear-stained face and trembling folded hands?  
Will you beg forgiveness and grace from the One,  
who begged you for the kindness of a little spare change  
from your vast wealth of time on earth?*

*It will all come back to you then –  
that you had nothing to give,  
and wandered off, looking for some trifle  
to break the boredom of your divine discontent.  
Seconds into hours, days into weeks, months into years,  
you remained a tyrant mind teeming with desires,  
a bloated body, ravenous with hungers,  
a tortured soul, sobbing in the dark.*

*What must he send to waken you?  
A rain of suffering so cold, it freezes drops of pain into stones  
that hammer down on your head, until you change?*

*Tears falling – falling too late, for a lifetime gone,  
a lifetime lost to your careless ways.  
Down and down, your lifetime fell – one moment,  
one breath at a time, empty of devotion.*

*Listen, dear friend!  
Can you not feel the pain from where this poem has come?  
Follow me down and down to the prison cell of your soul.  
Can you not hear her tears cried for freedom lost,  
the wasted wonder of Shabd waiting so close, inside?*

*I implore you, dear friend! Wake up now!  
Before it is too late. Let your lifetime stand and serve  
for something more than a cautionary tale.  
Fill this moment with the circle of Holy Names,  
the face of your Master or the stream of sacred Sound.  
Fill it now, my friend! Because this moment you are in  
is the only one you ever have to live – or give away.*

*Fill this breath with perfect presence.  
Be the bliss of Shabd thrilling through you,  
love at the speed of light.  
Then breathe your first sigh of relief.  
For this is the peace and grace that is given  
for every moment and breath that you take,  
and give back to the One –  
burning bright and filled to the brim.*



# Sweet to Me Is Your Will

A saintly faqir once lived on the outskirts of a village in northern India, and it was to him that the village people always went for advice. Suddenly, there was an epidemic that killed all the roosters, hens and chickens in the village, so the villagers went straight to the faqir.

“O faqir,” they told him, “we have lost all our hens and roosters, and even the little chickens. What shall we do?”

“There must be some good in it,” was the faqir’s reply, and nothing could induce him to say more.

A few days later a sickness of some kind struck down all of the villagers’ many dogs. Once again they went to the faqir. “Now, O faqir,” they told him, “every single dog in the village has died. We are without watchdogs and at the mercy of thieves. What shall we do?”

“God must have seen some good in this also,” the faqir told them.

In those days, before there were any matchsticks, everyone in India would cover their cooking fires with ashes to keep them alive. But a few days after all the dogs had died, every single cooking fire in the village mysteriously went out, all at the same moment. At this, the villagers were more distressed than ever. They told the faqir what had happened.

“This is another sign of the grace of God,” he said with all the serenity in the world.

“What grace can there be when we have no fire left with which to cook our food?” the villagers demanded of him.

“Wait and see. Wait and see,” said the faqir. “Have patience. It is not always a simple matter to discern the plans of God.”

Scarcely a day had gone by when a cruel and warlike king, accompanied by a huge army, passed through the countryside surrounding the village. Wherever he went, his soldiers killed, looted, burnt and destroyed with a savage and terrifying ferocity. When the king came near to the village of the faqir, he looked at it to see whether he should order it to be burnt and robbed. But when he saw that there was not a single cock crowing, not a single dog barking, and not a single fire smoking, he told his leading general, “That is a deserted village. It is not worth bothering about. Order the army forward to the next village.”



It was only then that the villagers came to understand the meaning of all that had happened. Going to the faqir, they offered him their heartfelt thanks.

“Ah brothers, all is now well with you,” said the faqir. “For where the Lord is pleased to abide, nothing can go wrong.”

*Tales of the Mystic East*

*Sweet to me is your will, O Lord;  
but for your true Name, nothing do I seek.*

Guru Arjan, Adi Granth



# Any Questions, Please?

From time immemorial, seekers embracing spirituality have sought answers to their numerous questions from their spiritual teachers. However, all mystics have the same message to deliver and the same truth to share.

On the path of Sant Mat, the Masters use question-and-answer sessions to provide a strong foundation for their disciples. Their answers form a practical guide on how to live a balanced life within the principles of the spiritual path. It is during these sessions that one bears witness to the deep bond of love, trust and friendship that exists between Master and disciple.

For the Masters, no person or question is unimportant. They understand every seeker's disposition – where they are coming from and where they are headed. In one particular session, Hazur Maharaj Ji remarked, "I'm trying to understand you, rather than the question."

The Masters' answers reveal their understanding of the problems and struggles that their disciples go through. Their responses encourage their disciples to find solutions to their problems using a logical and practical approach. Rather than provide direct answers, the Masters offer perspective, encouragement, confidence, and the reassurance that there is always a solution to every problem.

*The words of the Master became a cocoon of safety and a prism of beauty and light through which we could look at our lives, and our world, with fresh eyes.*

Introduction, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I

Given that there is no dearth of books, question-and-answer recordings, and even satsangs, we often hear the same questions and answers repeatedly. Hazur Maharaj Ji would sometimes start a session in his inimitable humorous style by asking, "Any new questions?"

*Whether the answer to your question is in six pages or in a book or in one line, the answer is the same: simran and bhajan! It depends upon how*

*much time you want to take to understand that answer – whether by reading the whole book or by understanding only one or two words.*

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

The Masters interact with their disciples at their level, encouraging seekers to ask questions, talk about their spiritual difficulties, and clear their doubts. With utmost humility, the Masters treat every individual with kindness and respect. They respond with affection yet firmness, assuring us that the real Master, the Shabd, is always with us.

The words of the Master and the loving atmosphere at these question-and-answer sessions leave a profound and enduring impression upon the mind. They provide the inspiration needed to propel the disciple to meditate and grow on the spiritual path. This is perhaps the real reason why disciples ask questions. Undoubtedly, many of the questions are actually just excuses to stand before the Master and absorb his positive presence.

*We always know the answer when we ask a question. It is in our subconscious. The answer is always there, but we only want a corroboration of that which we think is right, and we are happy when we find that it is right. That is all; otherwise all our books are full of answers.*

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

As spiritual beings traversing this human journey, we need to make the most of these grace-filled opportunities to gain spiritual direction and motivation. These wonderful sessions bring to light different perspectives, offering a depth that goes far beyond the capacity of an ordinary mind. They nurture our ability to understand the teachings and apply them in a practical way in our daily life, while at the same time dispelling confusion from our minds.

These lively meetings bring about a certain clarity and understanding even though at the end of the day, everyone realizes that there is only one answer – meditation.

*Well, brother, you can ask me any number of questions, but I am sorry to say, I have only one answer. You see, I don't mind attending to your questions, but my answer will be the same in a nutshell. Whether you take*

*it in a simple word or whether you take it in a more complicated word, or whether I explain it to you intellectually or in a simple way, there is no difference. The answer will be the same.*

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

Ultimately, the Master's answers deliver the teachings in a nutshell – to live a balanced life, fulfilling both our worldly and spiritual responsibilities, devoting as much time to meditation as possible with sincerity and faith. Time spent in meditation is not time taken away from worldly duties; rather it provides the necessary strength to discharge them earnestly and efficiently. It helps us sail through life in a state of equilibrium, navigating all the highs and lows of our journey while clearing our karmic debts. Eventually, the Masters tell us, once we achieve this state of balance and we realize the truth, automatically our questions just fade away.

*At that level of consciousness, what questions will you ask? You're not interested in the world; you're not interested in this creation at all. You're so much absorbed in your love and being with your beloved, what questions will you ask? You may have a list of a thousand questions in your hand, but you forget everything, and all your questions are dissolved. Love helps you to rise above all those questions. Definitely he answers all your questions, but you will hardly have any question to ask .*

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



# The Master Answers

## A selection of questions and answers with Maharaj Charan Singh

Q: *At the time of meditation, what thoughts should we have?*

A: I think we should have no thoughts at all. The purpose of meditation is to get rid of all the worldly thoughts which are bothering us day and night. We have to withdraw ourselves from all these daily thoughts. But the first question is, what is meditation? Unless we know what meditation is, we cannot know on what we have to concentrate. Meditation means withdrawing our consciousness to the eye centre and holding our attention there, then attaching ourselves to the Shabd or Nam, the sound current, which is within every one of us, and with the help of that, detaching ourselves permanently, forever, from the lower senses. That is meditation.

*Die to Live*

Q: *Life seems so painful. Why must we suffer so much?*

A: You see, I don't know our concept of suffering. Suffering is a comparative word. If our suffering can pull us towards the Father, that's a blessing. If our suffering can keep the Lord in our heart day and night, and we have been able to tune ourselves to him, it's a blessing. It's not a suffering at all. It's just a comparative word.

Kings also think they suffer. They have a whole country to rule, but still they think they are suffering. The beggar, if he gets just his bowl of rice, a little thing to eat to fill his stomach, on that day, he doesn't think that he's suffering. But a king, with all his possessions around him, he thinks he's suffering, shivering in his shoes on his throne. So it just depends on your point of view, it's just a comparative word.

Otherwise, we're all suffering in this creation, suffering in separation from the Father. Separated from the Father, nobody can remain happy in this creation at all. Some are comfortably miserable; other people are just miserable. But we are all miserable in separation from him. We can never get peace within unless the

soul goes towards the Father. Unless the soul becomes one with the Father, we can never be happy. No matter if the Lord gives us the whole creation at our feet, we can never be happy.

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*

Q: *Would you discuss obedience and the part it plays in our spiritual teachings? Many people have job conditions that require obedience of many types in their varied duties at work.*

A: Obedience is another word for submission. And submission is another word for driving out the ego. When we are proud or full of ego, we do not like to submit to anybody, we do not like to be obedient to anybody. In other words, obedience means merging your will in the will of the other person. Driving your 'self' out of yourself and merging your will with the will of another, that is obedience.

This is the first lesson which is given to our children in our Indian homes. They must be obedient to their parents and do what the parents tell them. There is no question or reason why. They must learn to understand in life how to drive out their ego, how to respect the elders and be obedient to their wishes. Then it is for the parents to come up to that standard to demand obedience. But children are always taught to be respectful and obedient to their elders. When we go to school, we must be obedient to our teacher. We must submit our will to the teacher's will. And we have to practise the same thing when we come on the path, which is obedience to the Master. But obedience will come only when there is love within us, for without love obedience can never come.

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*



# Why Marriage?

One evening meeting at the Dera, a man asked Baba Ji whether it was all right for him and his girlfriend to live together without getting married. Since marriage has been devalued to such an extent, what was the point of getting married? The vow that was solemnized between two people as a commitment for life, that was considered sacred within the context of one's religion, in these days seems hardly worth the paper on which it is written. Where then, he asked, was the need for a formal ceremony?

The Master was clear in his reply. He said that by not getting married, the gentleman was simply avoiding his responsibilities. Baba Ji quickly put before us a vivid picture of the chaos that would ensue when none are clear about their responsibilities. We saw a world of confused and distressed people – adults and children – in which no norms could be established; a world in which everyone was going in different directions – each in the way he or she wanted – and no one was ready to compromise on his or her desires. We saw a world in which everyone's priority was maintaining his or her individual rights and personal freedom. But without a commitment to something beyond oneself, who would decide what was right? How quickly would such a world become a lonely nightmare of disappointment, anger, bitterness and frustration?

Marriage is one of the key institutions of civilization. If we are to understand why it is important, we need to remind ourselves of two things in particular. First, no one can function as an island. Without cooperation and compromise, without mutually respected rules of conduct, who would decide what gets done? If I am going to pursue what I want at all costs, it may well be that what I want does not suit or appeal to you. Second, we have to remind ourselves of the simple and self-evident truth that nothing can be achieved without commitment. We have to put our roots down deep if we are to draw sustenance from life's depths – and this cannot happen if we keep changing focus. We need to think through these issues. In a world where values are not shared, on whom would we be able to depend? How could we raise children? Don't children absorb their values from within the family during their early years? If our early environment is stable and positive, it nurtures positive values within us. Has the science

of human behaviour shown us a better way to learn the important lessons of life other than in the context of a loving family? In a world where the family unit does not exist, how would we transmit positive values from one generation to the next? Where there is no emotional and social stability, not only is life traumatic for the children, but it affects us too.

Our code of conduct creates order and stability out of potential chaos. It reflects our fragile spiritual understanding and provides a refuge from the confusion at the surface of life. By representing more than our immediate interests, it helps us contain our actions so that we can experience the deeper truths of life. The institution of marriage is a significant element in our moral code, for it provides a structure within which to grow and meet our responsibilities.

When we come into a physical relationship with a person of the opposite sex, when we act in accordance with one of the deepest forces of the creation and give birth to children, whose responsibility are they if not ours? If the union does not produce children, do we think this means that no responsibilities ensue? If we devalue the physical act of creation by treating it as a means of pleasure alone, then it can only point to our blindness: even if we do not have children, our involvement with each other runs deep through this union, so the consequences and responsibilities are commensurate, and will surely have to be met one day. When we have relationships outside marriage, we are looking for the pleasures of a partnership without the responsibilities. We do not even give ourselves a chance to experience the responsibilities, for without a supportive framework it is easy to think they do not exist. As soon as we feel trouble brewing, we are on our way – looking for happiness elsewhere.

It is a myth of our present times that happiness comes from being with the right partner. This suits the mind – it is always looking for variety. But we need to remind ourselves constantly that it is our mind that is our problem. It is the mind that prevents us from going beyond the physical. It alone keeps us from experiencing the inner music of the Shabd. Our mind is rooted in the layers of impressions from our previous actions and thoughts that sit like thick sound-proofing around our soul.

How far are we going to let it take us? And if we are not ready to make the commitment needed for marriage, how can we imagine that we will remain committed to the journey of our soul that lies ahead?



How, without commitment, can we ever experience the depths of life? We will spend our entire lives skating on the surface. In our relationships, we may not even get to know our partner before we get disappointed or frustrated and look to change. Our problems may well manifest themselves in our relationships, but they do not originate there. We do not see that we have got things back to front, that it is for us to find happiness first within ourselves, and only then can we *build* a partnership of two happy people learning to live together in tolerance and love.

Marriage is a public statement of a commitment. By making our partnership public, we cement it. By institutionalizing it, we further cement it. No partnership is easy, and marriage is no different – so we need all the help we can get. Marriage provides a framework to hold two people together, so that in times of trouble they don't split or drift apart. It gives a reference point beyond two minds, and creates space within which their differences can exist.

Some people may argue that a private commitment to each other is sufficient. In many countries this is acceptable by law – for taxation or other purposes – so who needs a piece of paper? But if we reflect a little, we will discover this is a way of avoiding commitment. Whatever the intellect may say, who would deny that legal marriage is a significant step, even if it is no more than the simplest of ceremonies? That is maybe why the proponents of this argument wish to avoid it: legal marriage *is* binding.

Commitment, responsibility, steadiness, a concern for the well-being of others – all are aspects of love. We should think of love as a *verb*, something we do, not just something that happens by chance. How many times does the Master point out that we do not even understand what love is. He explains how our difficulties arise because we confuse love with the physical. Love is beyond the physical, he keeps telling us; true love is constant and unconditional, true love does not alter with change.

We call ourselves *satsangis* – those who associate with the truth. In our essence we are the truth, the reality, for which we yearn. Call it God, call it truth, call it love, call it the Word; it is the essence of life, our life-force of you and me. By initiation into the practice of the Word, we are given the key to find this treasure within ourselves. It is for us to use the key. For this, too, we need commitment. We need commitment, steadfastness and

courage – not every day is a sunny day on the spiritual path. We need to be clear about our priorities – but we keep forgetting them. We start to think our interests lie in our relationships, in emotional happiness right now. We lose sight so easily of the bigger picture.

By committing ourselves to live with one person, we give ourselves the opportunity to be constant and learn how to love. Marriage is “till death do us part, for richer for poorer, in sickness and health.” As we live through the years in one relationship, we learn that human love can be transformed from the excitement of romantic love and the passion of youthful lust into a deeper sort of love marked by the selflessness, compassion, and generosity that come with time. When things are difficult, there is only one practical option and that is to *work on ourselves*. To achieve harmony through the ups and downs of life, we have to keep on developing. Within a marriage we can nurture friendship, so aptly and beautifully described by Maharaj Charan Singh as a relationship “where you have a clean and clear understanding with someone – he accepts you for what you are and you accept him for what he is. He wants to help you. You want to help him. That is friendship. It is very rare.” For a good marriage, we need big hearts filled with positive qualities – tolerance, trust, patience, compassion and forgiveness; our commitment leads us to develop these qualities within ourselves.

Marriage is a purpose-designed vessel to hold, protect and nourish earthly love. This earthly love is precious and sacred, not because it has been sanctioned by a religious organization, but because it reflects the yearning of the soul for union with its Source. It can shape the order of our world and, as it expresses itself through the love of parent and child or husband and wife, it is one of the best ways we have of making the world a better place. Rightly directed, it is the same love that will take us home. In the *Mathnawi*, Rumi says:

*Love is the astrolabe of the mysteries of God. Whether love be from this earthly side or from that heavenly side, in the end it leads us yonder.*

Maharaj Charan Singh, after explaining at length the protective function of marriage for those with spiritual values, ended by giving us a simple metaphor: If we want the shoe to stay on, we have to tie the lace.



# Now Is the Time

The moment we are born the clock starts ticking. No matter which country we are from, whether we are rich or poor, healthy or sick – sooner or later, the clock will stop and death will come for us all.

It is not easy to accept death. Moreover, thinking about it can be quite depressing. This does not mean we should live with a pessimistic attitude or lose all hope because we know we are eventually going to die. In fact, keeping our mortality at the forefront of our mind is a good way to maintain an attitude of gratitude. By accepting the reality of death, our lives become purposeful and we focus our energy on things that truly matter.

Nowadays, it is often difficult to be spiritually inclined, especially because there are so many distractions vying for our attention, including the pressures of work and our day-to-day commitments. The Sant Mat Masters, throughout the ages, have taught the method of ‘dying daily’ through the practice of meditation. They emphasize the importance of practising every day alongside our worldly duties because it is only through consistent meditation that we can conquer death.

Conquering death through daily meditation involves submitting ourselves to the will of the Lord. It helps us develop the understanding that this life is a dream; that we are living in an illusory world and that we should aspire to something permanent and everlasting.

Through meditation, we become attached to the sublime pull of the Shabd, the primary life force that holds the universe together. The Shabd is present in all life forms and manifests itself throughout the entire creation. Becoming attached to the Shabd through meditation is to become aware of our true nature. We are not limited to the perishable flesh and bones of our physical body – we are soul, which is immortal. The goal of human life is to transcend our limited existence and realize that we are something much greater than this physical body.

*Just as a pot filled with mud remains sunk in water and rises to the surface as soon as the mud is washed away, so also the soul, freed from the mud of karmas, rises at once to the higher regions....*

*Just as rising up is the very nature of the flame, so also is rising upward the innate nature of the soul. Therefore, it ascends at once to the higher regions as soon as it is freed.*

*The Essence of Jainism*

The Shabd is always present in all of us, calling us back just as a magnet attracts a needle. The soul is of the same essence as the Shabd, so it is its nature to be drawn to it, its source. It is an intuitive tendency of the soul to be drawn to the Shabd. We might believe that we need to hear the Sound or see something in meditation to experience its bliss. But the Masters tell us that this is not the case. The Shabd is constantly pulling us and purifying us whether we are aware of it or not. Most of us are not aware of the Shabd due to the heavy load of karmas tying us down to this creation. Through the constant practice of meditation, as we gradually lighten our load, the Shabd pulls us upward until we eventually merge with it. The more receptive we become to this pull, the more prepared and fearless we become in the face of the unknown.

Through simran (repetition), and bhajan (listening to the divine Sound), we become saturated with the Shabd's purifying power and experience the intensity of God's grace. We come to understand that there was never any separation and we were always a part of the One. The process of dying while living allows the Shabd to cleanse the mind every single day. Slowly and surely, we start to realize through our daily practice that our true self is the immortal soul and not the perishable body. Thus, every moment spent trying to contact the Shabd is time well-spent.

So seize the moment – *carpe diem!* The moment is now. The only time that we have is the present, because anything can happen tomorrow.

Let us stop living in a state of denial, letting the years go by while we neglect our spiritual practice. As we grow older, our responsibilities also increase and it becomes harder to set aside time to meditate. It is a fallacy to think that we will have time when we retire. By then our bodies will give way and we will be filled with regret. We will wish that we had given time to our spiritual practice when we were younger. So let us not delay any further. Even if our efforts seem to yield no progress, every attempt is accepted in the court of the Lord. With sincerity, persistence and constant practice, the grace of the Master will take us across this ocean of existence back to our true home.



# The Spark of Love

An Explanation by Maharaj Sawan Singh

Love is a music whose beauty does not diminish. It is a pain which is full of sweetness. It is a feeling which, once experienced, can never be forgotten. If you wish to know about love, you should ask a worshiper of love, or you may ask a nightingale that has fallen in love with a rose. Or you may ask a moth that has sacrificed its life, without hesitation, for the flame. Therefore, do not ask about love from any other person except a lover himself, because he alone can tell you anything about it.

Only a lover knows how to describe love. In his own beautiful and well-chosen words, he will help you to understand it clearly.

If you wish to see the spark of love, you should look into the eyes of one who is intoxicated with love. Then you will see how all intellect, reason, knowledge, mind and thinking have been swept away and have merged into the ocean of thoughts of the Beloved. From such a one you may get some idea of love.

Saints are an ocean of love, because they are already merged into the Lord, and the Lord is love. The currents of love emanating from the saints spread out and influence every nook and corner of the world. By receiving such currents, one's heart is inclined to meet the Lord.

Love in which there is even a small amount of selfishness or selfish desires, or even a tiny thought of some bargain, is not real love. True love is only for the sake of love itself. The only wish of a true lover is to be united with the Beloved. Love is awakened when the currents of love, which emanate from the Beloved, enter into our hearts. This is true love, and it is not dependent on any outside influence.

What is *prem* (love)? This is a question the answer to which is in the hands of a lover. Others cannot understand even a small fraction of it.

If you wish to know about love, go to a saint and ask him. If you want to know how the heart goes out of your hands, ask one who has lost his heart.

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



# Our Best Guide

In the course of daily life, we either hand out criticism or receive it from the many people we relate to. And more often than not, we encounter delicate situations where anger and hurt feelings usually predominate.

In most cases, the person at the receiving end of the criticism is vulnerable to hurt because most likely, he takes it personally. The person giving the critique also is vulnerable to anger, as criticism is usually provoked when a mistake is made or when there is failure in meeting expectations.

So what is the correct attitude for a spiritual practitioner toward giving and receiving criticism? Maharaj Charan Singh advises:

*Brother, we should not mind anybody's criticism at all. I can tell you, critics are the best guide in life. We should always keep our ears and eyes open to our critics. We must weigh their criticism without any ill will towards them. If it has any weight, we should try to learn from that criticism and try to improve ourselves. If it is just for the sake of criticizing, you can just ignore it. But our critics are the best guides in our lives, for our improvement. Without our critics, we would never be conscious of our shortcomings, our weaknesses. They are very essential for us to improve ourselves.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*

Viewing our critics as our best guides in life or as benchmarks for self-improvement is indeed a positive attitude to adopt. It gives us a more objective point of view, allowing us to see ourselves in a different light. A detached perspective allows us to evaluate ourselves and find ways to improve and grow in view of our shortcomings and weaknesses, without getting hurt and taking things personally.

On the other hand, if we are the one who is criticizing another, we should do so politely, with the intention to help and not condemn. Likewise, we should not be demeaning or act superior to avoid the possibility that the person being criticized might feel inferior. The Buddha had a rule worth remembering: "Before you speak, let your words pass through three gates: Is it true, is it necessary, is it kind?"

Maharaj Charan Singh affirms this when he replies to someone who asks for advice on how to address the truth when criticizing someone.

*I don't say that we should compromise with the truth, but there is a way of putting a truth to another person. Our approach should be one of love, of helpfulness. But if we think we are superior, then we are only using the truth to humiliate the other person. The approach is not right. At times, silence is golden. Most of our problems in this creation come from our tongue. If we can control it, I think we have solved 80 percent or 90 percent of our problems – if we know how to control our tongue, how to use it. The truth shouldn't be used as an excuse to humiliate another person. It depends upon the approach, how to reach out to a person and what your motives are.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*

Clearly, we must put in every effort to ensure that our good intention is expressed gently and appropriately. Only in such a manner will our suggestions come across as constructive criticism and not as character assassination. A lot of nuances in the delivery of a critique come into play – our choice of words, the tone of our voice, our approach, our posturing and even our attitude – all reflect the sincerity of our intention. The spirit of love and helpfulness must prevail over a feeling of superiority.

The Masters guide us and describe for us the ideal way to act and behave. In fact, they are the example that we all aspire to emulate.

Yet in reality, we rarely achieve this ideal when receiving or giving criticism in situations where tensions run high is extremely rare. More often than not, egos dominate and hurt and anger prevail.

How then can we control ourselves so that we behave closer to the ideal that the Master prescribes?

*The fact that we are here is a clear indication that we are victims of the disease of ego, and that the disease of ego will go from us only when we are attached to the Word, to Shabd or Nam. That drives ego from us and creates humility within us.*

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

Meditation – the practice of stilling the mind in order to catch the Shabd – is the single most important cure for the disease of ego. Sitting in silence regularly for two and a half hours every day tames and focuses the mind. Its tendency to flow outward and downward is reversed inward, enabling it to catch the inner light and sound – the ringing radiance that purifies the mind. When this happens, the I-ness or the self-centeredness that defines the ego is replaced by a higher consciousness and love for the Lord. As the ego slowly dissolves, refined qualities such as humility, simplicity, honesty and calmness are developed. These virtues then help us deal with criticism in a manner closer to what the Masters prescribe.

Thereafter, we learn the value of listening more and speaking less. The spirit of love that diligent and constant meditation engenders opens the mind and invokes a kind of humility. This then allows us to take every criticism as an opportunity to improve and become better human beings.





# His Will

Surely the most common obstacle we face is stress. It has been said that one of the main causes of stress is worry – repetitive thinking about a particular incident, event or situation, and analyzing the endless possibilities and anticipated outcomes. We end up in an anxious state of mind, and our body's fight or flight response kicks in. Perceiving this stress on our mind, the body reacts with a variety of physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach aches and a myriad of other ailments.

Surely, this sad state of being, where we constantly have to deal with the mind's automatic reactions to events around us, cannot be the only way to live in this world.

Saints tell us that this whole world is full of misery, sorrow and sickness. That is why we can never get everlasting happiness in this world, and why we have to constantly deal with the compulsions of the mind.

In fact, the worry we face often stems from our inability to relinquish control and let go of situations or circumstances. We think of ways to solve problems to get the best possible outcome for ourselves not realizing that we can never solve all the problems of the world.

Fortunately, spiritual Masters advise us that there is a way to rise above our circumstances. Like cream rising to the surface when milk is churned, we too can purify our mind to the extent that we can rise above our worries.

*The saints give us certain handles or levers, a way of meditation, through which we can always rise above these problems. If we try to pick up all the splinters of the world, we cannot succeed. But if we have strong shoes on our feet, they do not bother us at all. The saints arm us with that meditation (the strong shoes), so that the ups and downs of the world do not bother us at all. We come to that stage, that level, where the worldly situation makes us neither happy nor unhappy.*

*The real happiness we can get only when we merge back into the Lord. So, as long as we are in this world, we have to face ups and downs; sometimes we are rich, sometimes we are poor, sometimes we are happy, sometimes we are unhappy. But we should not lose our balance.*

*We should always try to keep our thoughts in meditation. That is why saints advise us to remain in his will.*

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

The saints teach us that meditation is the only way to anchor our attention on to that Divine power that sustains the entire creation and rise above our worries. But often, instead of applying the teachings of the Masters to our lives and accepting our situation, we blame others for our pain and suffering. We refuse to believe that ‘*not a leaf stirs without His command*’, as the saying so succinctly puts it.

Spiritual teachers explain that when events unfold beyond our control, it is simply a case of karmic accountability in action. They tell us that we can never really know whether a particular event is the outcome of an old karmic debt or an action that will trigger a new set of chain reactions. Therefore, with the best of intentions and to the best of our ability, all we can do is make the right choices and perform good actions.

Accepting the Lord’s will is the only way to free ourselves from the burden of worries and the stress that results from it. Practically speaking, it means facing our karmas gracefully and boldly while keeping our attention in meditation.

Saints remind us that we must never forget the Lord, especially if we are in a position where we are reaping the benefits of good karmas. It does not serve our purpose to give in to sensual pleasures or get carried away by worldly achievements. Similarly, in times of adversity and stress, if we worry, and feel sorry for ourselves, our attention scatters into the world and we lose our hard-earned focus in meditation. Since both good and bad karmas will always exist as long as we live in this body, our only course of action is to meditate and be persistent in training the mind to resign itself to his will.

*So, the saints advise us that whether we are reaping the fruits of good karmas or of bad karmas, we should always keep our attention in the Lord. That is what we call Bhana. We have to remain in his will. We have to be resigned unconditionally to his will.*

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

Guru Arjan Dev Ji has written: “*Tera bhana mitha lage*” (Sweet Is Thy Will).

Knowing that the Lord loves us and is taking care of us is the strongest balm, and it will calm our minds. Time spent in his remembrance is the only way to obtain comfort and peace in this world.

*The Guru’s devotee treats pain and pleasure alike and remains detached from joy and sorrow. By effacing his ego under the Guru’s guidance, the devotee attains the Lord, O Nanak, and gets absorbed in the state of sahaj.*

*Jap Ji, A Perspective*



# The Steering Wheel

The dictionary defines prayer as a solemn request for help or an expression of thanks addressed to God. Regardless of one's faith, human beings consider prayer to be a channel of communication between man and his Creator. A prayer can be silent, spoken, written, a mental conversation, or even a song. It can be a petition to fulfill our wishes or an expression of gratitude. Many people also turn to prayer to find hope, peace, and solace.

Some people pray daily and some pray in times of need. Some pray for themselves and some pray for their loved ones. So why do we pray? Do we pray to praise the Lord, to remember him, to thank him, or to ask him to fulfill our desires?

Often, we ask the Lord to take away our troubles and sorrows. We ask for material things that give us temporary happiness. But if we believe that the Lord is omniscient and omnipotent, then why do we feel the need to ask for anything at all? We acknowledge that he is all-knowing, yet we ask him to give us what we think we need. Perhaps this is why the Masters often remind us that if the Lord has the power to give, shouldn't he also have the power to know what we need?

While it is every child's prerogative to knock on the Father's door, mystics enlighten us when they explain that while such prayers bring us comfort, they cannot change the events of life. What they do is give us the strength and willpower to face those situations. They remind us that happiness does not lie in changing the events of our life but in being able to adjust to them.

*All remember God in times of trouble  
But few remember him in days of prosperity.  
Were they to remember him  
In days of happiness,  
They would never see days of sorrow.*

*Kabir, The Great Mystic*

So as students of spirituality, do we use prayer to dictate to the Lord based on the desires of our mind or do we explain to the mind to stay in the will of the Lord?

Sant Mat teaches us that when we put worldly desires between us and the Father, we create a barrier that hinders our receptivity to his grace. Prayer is not a venue for the submission of our desires. What is required in prayer is submission of the self.

But prayer is often considered a spare wheel – something to turn to in times of need. But what if we could make it our steering wheel? Something we could use to steer us in the direction of faith and love? Faith helps us to understand that whatever the Lord gives us is best for us, and love makes us appreciate all the blessings that are constantly being bestowed upon us.

Mystics tell us that meditation is such a prayer. It is our steering wheel. It strengthens our love, faith, and devotion. It shifts our attention from the external illusory world to the reality that lies within. It teaches us to develop an attitude of submission. It gives us a perspective of gratitude, and there is no prayer greater than a grateful heart.

*You, O benevolent Giver, are the paragon of generosity;  
I beg for your grace, O Lord,  
that I may praise no one but You  
and never indulge in trading spirituality for worldly gain.*

Saint Tukaram, in *The Voice of the Heart*

Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh defines prayer as real love and devotion – the yearning of the soul to go back to its own source.

He explains that meditation is nothing but a prayer. It is knocking at the door of the Giver. It is begging the Father for his grace, for his forgiveness, for what stands between us and the Father. In prayer there should be nothing between the soul and the Father.

No set words, no specific ritual, language or place is required for true worship. There are no social conventions and no mandatory rules for prayer. There is only one requirement – love. Love is the truest form of prayer. It is the life and spirit of all practices. True prayer rises from a sincere heart. True prayer is meditation, where we do not speak to the Lord, but when, in a state of submission, we listen to his divine voice and feel the intensity of his love.



# BOOK REVIEW

## The Trauma of Everyday Life

BY MARK EPSTEIN, MD

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“I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end of suffering.” The Buddha taught this through the Four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the truth of the cause of suffering, the truth of the end of suffering, and the path that leads to the end of suffering. He explained that the cause of suffering is clinging to pleasure and avoiding pain, and the end of suffering comes about by following the practices of the Eightfold Path – right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. In *The Trauma of Everyday Life*, Mark Epstein, a practicing Buddhist and a psychiatrist, examines two forms of suffering – acute trauma that is a result of extreme circumstances, and a more chronic trauma, the day-to-day dissatisfaction, anxiety, unease that comes from living in a fleeting and temporary world. The Pali word the Buddha used, *dukkha*, generally translated into English as suffering, covers both.

Epstein says that suffering “happens to everyone. The potential for it is part of the precariousness of human existence.” Even what we call “trauma” we should see as

*simply a fact of life.... Trauma is all pervasive. It does not go away. It continues to reassert itself as life unfolds.... If one can treat trauma as a fact and not as a failing, one has the chance to learn from the inevitable slings and arrows that come one's way.*

The famous story of Kisagotami, a mother whose infant son died suddenly, is an example of the universality of suffering. She went to the Buddha in her grief and asked him to bring her son back to life. The Buddha said he had the correct medicine, but first she had to bring back some mustard seed from a house where no one had died. She went to her village, but she couldn't find anyone who had not suffered a death in the family, so she returned to the Buddha without the mustard seed. The Buddha replied,

“You thought that you alone had lost a son. The law of death is that among all living creatures there is no permanence.” Later, after becoming a disciple of the Buddha, she stood on a hillside at night gazing down at the village below. As she noticed the lights flickering, she realized that her own state was like the lamps. The Buddha said to her, “All living beings resemble the flame of these lamps, one moment lighted, the next extinguished – those only who have arrived at Nirvana are at rest.”

When Epstein was traveling in Asia with one of his meditation teachers, he met Ajahn Chah, a well-known monk from the Thai Forest tradition. Epstein asked Ajahn Chah what wisdom he could take back to share with people in the West. Ajahn Chah asked,

*Do you see this glass? I love this glass. It holds the water admirably. When the sun shines on it, it reflects the light beautifully. When I tap it, it has a lovely ring. Yet for me, this glass is already broken. When the wind knocks it over or my elbow knocks it off the shelf and it falls to the ground and shatters, I say, ‘Of course.’ But when I understand that this glass is already broken, every minute with it is precious.*

Epstein explains that Ajahn Chah was modeling the teaching that one could appreciate and value the glass, while still knowing that it will not last. He was capturing the “pivotal truth” of impermanence without negating the value of life. The glass – the self, this life – is valuable so it is important to respect and appreciate it, while knowing that it is, in a sense, already broken. Suffering is a basic fact of existence. Epstein further explains:

*We remain entangled in our tangles, burning with the three fires of greed, hatred and delusion. The Buddha had something else in mind for us.... Look closely at this world, he suggested. Examine it carefully. Probe your experience deeply, with attunement and responsiveness, and you may come to agree with me. Like the glass, the world is already broken. And yet when you drop your fear and open your heart, its preciousness is there too.*

Another story about a beautiful young woman of the Buddha’s time named Patacara illustrates the depth of understanding that can arise when a person loses everything. Patacara was the daughter of a wealthy merchant. Her parents confined her to the top floor of their large home until they could

arrange her marriage, but she fell in love with one of the family's servants and ran away with him to get married. She and her new husband moved far away and when she became pregnant with their first child she wanted to return to her ancestral home to give birth. She delivered the baby before she was able to do this, but sometime later, pregnant for a second time, Patacara set out for her parents' home. Her husband followed her and tried to stop her, but a storm arose unexpectedly. When he went to look for shelter he was bitten by a poisonous snake and died, so Patacara had to give birth alone in the midst of a raging storm. When she set out in the morning with her two children, she found his corpse, and blaming herself for his death, she proceeded on toward her parents' town. She came to a river that was swollen from the heavy rain, so she left her boy on the shore and took her baby across first. She placed the baby on the far bank and returned to get her son, but when she was halfway across a hawk swooped down and snatched the baby. When she screamed her son thought she was calling for him, so he jumped into the river to come to her. The current was too strong for him and he was carried away and drowned.

By this time, Patacara was completely traumatized, but there was still more suffering in store for her. When she reached the town where her parents lived, she learned that they had also died in the storm when their house collapsed on them and burned down. At this point, Patacara completely fell apart and people began to think she was crazy. The Buddha resided nearby and he recognized her as "one who was ripe for his message of deliverance." He gestured for her to come to him, and said, "Sister, regain your mindfulness." She was somehow able to recover her composure because of his words, and after listening carefully to her story, the Buddha said, "Patacara, do not be troubled any more. You have come to one who is able to be your shelter and refuge. It is not only today that you have met with calamity and disaster, but throughout this beginningless round of existence, weeping over the loss of sons and others dear to you, you have shed more tears than the waters of the four oceans."

Patacara did take refuge with the Buddha and his disciples, embarking on the Eightfold Path. Sometime later she was outside doing chores. She noticed water trickling down the slope of a hillside, and this resonated with her internal experience. "Some streams sank quickly into the ground,



others flowed down a little farther, while others flowed all the way to the bottom of the slope.” Patacara noted that some of the streams were like her children and they disappeared quickly from this journey of life. Some of the streams that flowed a little further were like her husband who lived into young adulthood. The streams that flowed to the bottom of the slope were like her parents who lived into old age. Patacara later wrote, “When I saw the water flow from the high ground down the slope, my mind became concentrated like an excellent thoroughbred steed.” By taking refuge in the Buddha and by reflecting deeply upon her inner and outer reality, Patacara awakened and was able to relate to the tragedies in her life with “attunement and responsiveness.” Epstein says,

*With every reason in the world to feel sorry for herself, and with the pressures of grief compressing her heart, she managed to see deeply into the nature of reality.... Patacara's pain was so intense, her losses so grievous, it was amazing that she could go on at all. I can imagine that nothing else made sense to her than to give the Buddha's counsel a chance. As Patacara realized in her reflection upon the streams, there may be nothing else to do with the traumas that befall us than to use them for our own awakenings.*

Patacara and Kisagotami were both severely traumatized by their losses, but they were able to come to terms with them because they realized that their suffering was not out of the natural order of things; they realized that “trauma has been happening since the beginning of beginningless time.” For Patacara the realization came with the image of streams flowing down a slope, for Kisagotami it was flickering lights, and for Ajahn Chah it was the broken glass. They each understood that life is precious, fragile, and fleeting, but with “attunement and responsiveness,” difficult experiences can lead to awakening. Epstein tells these stories of “suffering and the end of suffering” and says,

*Trauma could be known, not only as a personal tragedy, but as an impersonal reflection of an underlying and universal reality. Suffering is part and parcel of human existence. It is in all of us, in one form or another. The choice we have is how we relate to it.*



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