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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Seeking the Perfect One

Although God lives in the souls of men who are unconscious of Him, how can I say that I have found Him and found myself in Him if I never know Him or think of Him, never take any interest in Him or seek Him or desire His presence in my soul? What good does it do to say a few formal prayers to Him and then turn away and give all my mind and all my will to created things? If my mind does not belong to Him then I do not belong to Him either. If my love does not reach out toward Him but scatters itself in His creation, it is because I have reduced His life in me to the level of a formality, forbidding it to move me with a truly vital influence.

[Dear God] justify my soul ... [and] occupy my heart with Your tremendous Life. Let me use all things for one sole reason: to find my joy in giving You glory. Keep me, above all things, from sin. Deliver my heart from sloth. Set me free from the laziness that goes about disguised as activity when activity is not required of me, and from the cowardice that does what is not demanded, in order to escape sacrifice.

But give me the strength that waits upon You in silence and peace. Give me humility in which alone is rest, and deliver me from pride which is the heaviest of burdens. Possess my whole heart and soul with the simplicity of love. Occupy my whole life with the one thought and the one desire of love, that I may love not for the sake of merit, not for the sake of perfection, not for the sake of virtue, not for the sake of sanctity, but for You alone.

For there is only one thing that can satisfy love and reward it, and that is You alone.

This then is what it means to seek God perfectly: to withdraw from illusion and pleasure, from worldly anxieties and desires, from the works that God does not want, from a glory that is only human display; to keep my mind free from confusion in order that my liberty may be always at the disposal of His will; to entertain silence in my heart and listen for the voice of God; to cultivate an intellectual freedom from the images of created things in order to receive the secret contact of God in obscure love; to love all men as myself; to rest in humility and to find peace in withdrawal from conflict and competition with other men; to turn aside

from controversy and put away heavy loads of judgment and censorship and criticism and the whole burden of opinions that I have no obligation to carry; to have a will that is always ready to fold back within itself and draw all the powers of the soul down from its deepest center to rest in silent expectancy for the coming of God, poised in tranquil and effortless concentration upon the point of my dependence on Him; to gather all that I am, and have all that I can possibly suffer or do or be, and abandon them all to God in the resignation of a perfect love and blind faith and pure trust in God, to do His will.

And then to wait in peace and emptiness and oblivion of all things. *Borlum est praestolari cum silentio salutare Dei.* (“It is good to wait in silence for the salvation of God.”)

Excerpt from *New Seeds of Contemplation* by Thomas Merton
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Save the Last Dance

“Save the Last Dance for Me” is a song first recorded by The Drifters, a 1960s American R&B vocal group. The track conveys the feelings of a man who takes his girlfriend to a dance, watches her having fun, and reminds her:

*But don't forget who's taking you home
And in whose arms you're gonna be
So darlin'
Save the last dance for me*

It's a bit like us with the Master, isn't it? Here we are, having fun in the world – well, at least some of the time – but do we remember who's taking us home and who our real relationship is with, or are we like the teenager of the song? In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh tells us that not only does the Lord love us far more than we can ever love him, but our love is nothing more than a response to his call:

We are all children playing in this world with the material or worldly faces.... We are so attached to them and absorbed in playing with them that we do not even think about the Lord. We think we love him, but actually he loves us. It is he who creates that love in us. We are just responding to his love ... he is more anxious to pull us than we are anxious to go back to him.

We may compare initiation to a marriage engagement. We are engaged to be united with the Lord much like a bride-to-be is engaged to be married to her fiancé. Before accepting the marriage offer, the girl presumably weighed up her future and then took this life-changing decision. Similarly, nobody carelessly asks for initiation on a whim. Only after reading the Sant Mat literature, attending satsang, asking ourselves if the philosophy makes sense and if we are willing to fulfil the vows – only then do we commit ourselves.

After initiation, we may experience a ‘honeymoon period’ – perhaps when we are in the presence of the physical Master. How easy it seems

then to practise meditation with vigour and enthusiasm and to repeat simran throughout the day. He is such an inspiring presence that the atmosphere is charged with otherworldly energy. We are told not to look for results in our meditation but, in his presence, we *do* feel as if we have been rewarded and the uplift and joy we experience inspires us to meditate every day with love and devotion.

Then the physical presence of the Master is withdrawn and we return to our jobs, our families, and our worldly responsibilities. In the words of the song, we're expected to "dance and sing" and throw ourselves into our various roles with much energy and aplomb. How hard we find it to keep a balance! Before we know it, we are going to the other extreme; our early morning meditation gets cut, the calm face with which we were able to meet problems gets ruffled. We are on the dance floor of life with no thought at all of whom we arrived with, where we belong, and who is taking us home.

And are we having such a good time anyway? It's easy to get lured into the so-called delights of the world, but the backlash can be terrible. Why is it that even in our pain and misery, we try to justify it all? The deeper we fall in the mire, the more we turn our back on the one who loves us most, accusing him of being overstrict, a killjoy, expecting an impossible level of discipline from us. But the Master wants us to wake up to reality. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I, Maharaj Charan Singh answers the following question:

Q: *Why do saints and mystics always seem to emphasize the darkness and ugliness of the world, rather than the beauty?*

A: *What is the one thing that belongs to you? The Father. Why don't you try to make him your own? When you get peace within, you'll get peace outside. That is their approach. They know the reality. It's not that they don't see beauty in this world or that they only try to explain the back side of the picture. But they also have to show us the back side of the picture. These faces are so beautiful, but from the back, those pictures are nails and cardboard.*

The Master couldn't make it clearer than this. The scenes we love are nothing more than "nails and cardboard" – that is, a stage backdrop that will be dismantled if not today, then tomorrow. Our Master would like us to face reality so that we can go where we can see the brilliance of our spiritual home rather than giving our hearts to the world's tinsel. How do we keep the idea of our real home in our hearts whilst at the same time making a good show on the dance floor? Meditation, of course, but it's important to remember the scope of what the Master means by meditation. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh tells us:

After initiation, whatever efforts we are making – doing simran, reading Sant Mat books, attending meetings, having good discussions, becoming a source of strength to each other, filling each other with love and devotion for the Father – these are all strong efforts towards our spiritual development.... Meditation is a way of life. Meditation is not closing yourself in a room for a couple of hours and then forgetting about it. It is a way of life. Your whole pattern of life is changed; your attitude of life is changed. That is meditation.

Baba Ji advises us to be good human beings. We could add: being a caring parent, a loving spouse or solicitous son or daughter, irrespective of whether our family follows the same spiritual path as us. It would be arrogant to expect all our associates to think as we do; they are on their journey in life just as we are on ours. "Judge not that ye be not judged" was one of the axioms of Jesus Christ. So being a good human being includes giving non-judgmental support to those around us. As we face our karmas and the impact of the karmic burden of those dear to us, it is only the stabilizing effect of daily meditation that enables us to go through life as a good human being. If we try, daily, to sit for our allotted time in simran, dhyān and bhajan, this will spread its effect during the rest of the day. We'll be able to play our part in life, have fun whilst all the time cherishing our true goal.

Sant Mat enjoins upon us a strict discipline. Attending to meditation is something we must do whether we feel like it or not.

Some days we certainly don't feel like it. But we have to put in the time nevertheless. Making an effort, despite everything, has its own strengthening effect and, before we know it, our heart is in it, and we really are carrying that love with us throughout the day, remembering our true companion and looking forward to the time when, arm in arm with him, we will return home.

But why leave it until the last dance? Instead of squandering our attention on companions who will never be ours, why not enjoy the dance floor with our faithful companion? If we show him we care, he will whisper, "Save *every* dance for me".



Truth in a Nutshell

We Learn by Doing

I am learning all the time. The tombstone will be my diploma.
Eartha Kitt

Not many years ago I began to play the cello. Most people would say that what I am doing is “learning to play” the cello. But these words carry into our minds the strange idea that there exist two very different processes: (1) learning to play the cello; and (2) playing the cello. They imply that I will do the first until I have completed it, at which point I will stop the first process and begin the second. In short, I will go on “learning to play” until I have “learned to play” and then I will begin to play. Of course, this is nonsense. There are not two processes, but one. We learn to do something by doing it. There is no other way.

John Holt, *Chicken Soup for the Soul*

* * *

Any time we devote to meditation, howsoever imperfect that meditation may be, is to our credit... Automatically quality comes with quantity. If we don't start, we will never learn to walk. If we start, then naturally we fall also, we get bruises also. But as long as we get up again and start walking again, we will ultimately learn.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol II



Never-Ending Travels or a Journey Home?

Quantum Leap is the popular American television show from the 1990s in which the protagonist, a physicist called Sam Beckett, finds himself inhabiting the body of a pilot fifty years in the past after a time-travel experiment goes awry. Desperate to return to his old life, Sam keeps repeating the experiment but, instead of waking up as his original self, he finds himself leaping into one body after another without ever reaching home.

The idea that *Quantum Leap* approximates even a semblance of reality seems absurd. But is it? According to the spiritual masters we have been jumping from one body to the next since time began. While Sam's quantum leaps are confined to people, the masters inform us that our coming and going encompasses *all* life forms, plants included! Clearly, there are other differences between ourselves and the programme's protagonist. Despite occupying a multitude of different bodies, Sam does not forget his original identity – in fact, it is this which explains his desperate desire to go home. By contrast, we retain no recollection of the life we led upon leaving one mortal body and moving into another. Moreover, whereas Sam's quantum leaps are random, where we end up is determined by karmic law.

From one perspective, existence on the material plane may be described as 'path-dependent.' While this term is typically used by social scientists to explain why organizations are unable to change, when applied to the human condition, path-dependency denotes that one's current situation is attributable to a set of choices made in the distant past and that our agency (i.e., our free will) is too marginal to effect change. Somewhat deterministic, this perspective depicts a bleak future in which we are unable to deviate from the path upon which we embarked aeons ago. Yet, this is exactly what the spiritual masters offer: the opportunity to bring our quantum leaping to an end and, conversely, embark upon a new journey headed to our place of origin.

Who are we?

To appreciate the significance of the opportunity presented by the masters, we first need to understand who we are. Is what makes each of us 'me' the same as the identity we carefully construct for the outside world, or the multiple roles we assume throughout life? Should we even talk about ourselves using pronouns such as 'me' and 'I'? The mystics have been answering these very questions throughout the ages. They begin, however, by informing us of a fundamental truth from which all other questions about our existence and the purpose of life itself can be answered.

The bedrock of spirituality, as expressed by all saints, is that God is present in all places and at all times. Although the word 'God' has come to signify an external entity, one residing in 'heaven' for example, the masters tell us that God is omnipresent. He manifests all forms and yet remains a single, indivisible power from which the entirety of the universe has sprung. Humanity has a tendency to anthropomorphize, but the mystics inform us that God is a super-conscious energy which, manifesting as a sound, is an unstruck melody blazing with effulgent light. The divine sound has been given a myriad of different names – Tao, Word, Kalma, Sound Current, the audible Life-stream and, in Sant Mat philosophy, Shabd.

However, as the masters emphasize, it is not the names which are important but the eternal truth they convey. As Maharaj Sawan Singh explains in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. IV, Shabd is the source of all life and energy in the universe. Everything that was, is, and will be is made by Shabd and is from Shabd. Whatever exists, exists because of Shabd – it is the beginning and end of all things. In fact, there is nothing which is not Shabd.

Turning to our original question about our real identity, Maharaj Sawan Singh emphatically explains that because whatever is manifested from Shabd cannot be anything but Shabd, our essence is Shabd. Should we harbour any lingering doubts or perhaps not fully understand who we are, the Great Master states: "Shabd is our creator ... our sustainer. We are of Shabd and Shabd is ours." Naturally, this raises further questions; if Shabd is our essence, what form does it take and why are we unaware of it?

Mystics explain that Shabd takes the form of a soul, which is our true identity and a particle of God. It follows that all of God's qualities and powers are also active in the soul. The beauty of this relationship is described by the Great Master in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. IV:

The soul is the consciousness and the Lord is the storehouse of consciousness. The soul is capable of thinking, and the Lord is an ocean of thoughts. The soul has intelligence and knowledge, and the Lord is the embodiment of knowledge and the treasure-house of intelligence. The soul is full of love, and the Lord is the source of all love. We are made in his image. Every particle is a part of the whole, and so are we.

So our self is not limited to the physical body, mind or personality. On the contrary, we are sparks of divine love undergoing a human experience.

Mistaken identities

Intellectual knowledge of our real identity does not necessarily mean we live our life in accordance with the implications this raises. Essentially, we find it virtually impossible to stop equating our real self with our 'ego' – the identity we painstakingly construct while residing in the body we inhabit temporarily. This is because the soul, upon descending from its abode with the Lord, has accumulated many coverings which have hidden its light. As the soul descended into matter ever more deeply, the more forgetful it became of its divine origin.

The soul's downfall is reflected in the fairytale about the princess who, falling victim to a wicked spell, slips into a deep slumber. Imprisoned, she remains asleep in a castle ferociously guarded by what appear to be insurmountable obstacles. Saving her requires great courage, which only an unconditional, pure love is able to muster; and it is only the embrace of such a love that can awaken the princess from her slumber and finally free her from her long imprisonment. Likewise, it is not worldly love that will awaken the soul and set her free. She, like the princess, can only awaken when touched by love of the highest order. This, in turn, can only happen when the Master's grace enables the soul to return to its origin.

The tale of the soul is not about mythical characters but tells the story of each one of us. We are the leading character in our own love story. To escape the darkness of our ignorance of our true nature – love – we must look within ourselves and find the most precious treasure of all – 'the pearl of great price' – our soul.



The Two Snakes

In the Gospel of Saint Matthew in the Bible we read, “Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it”. Few find the inner path to self- and God-realization because we identify with our mind, which constantly distracts us from our spiritual purpose. We need to exercise constant vigilance over the mind; otherwise, by indulging in what the author of *Living Meditation* terms “compulsive thinking”, we are likely to act upon the multitude of thoughts and desires the mind constantly generates. Spiritual progress, on the other hand, requires us to resist our instinct to embroil ourselves in the outer world and to mold our life in such a way that our every thought and action reflects our desire to reunite with the Lord. We must not underestimate the self-discipline and spiritual rigour this requires as we simultaneously meet our worldly obligations. We must completely reverse our most deeply ingrained habits and not succumb to most of the expectations society places upon us. As the author of *The Prodigal Soul* puts it:

The world says that physical existence is everything and all-important; spirituality says that it is only a mirage. The world fears death; spirituality advocates dying daily. The world says we should build up our sense of identity; spirituality says that we have no identity. The world seeks material comforts and sensory pleasures; spirituality considers them distractions retarding spiritual progress. The world says, “indulge”; spirituality says, “abstain”. The world says “go out and enjoy yourself”; spirituality says “go in and enjoy yourself”.

Becoming spiritually focused – that is, turning our attention inwards and away from the external – may be likened to swimming upstream or climbing a slippery rock face behind a waterfall. A single lapse in concentration is all it takes to fall to the bottom, washed away by the downward tendencies of the mind. Acknowledging the enormity of the challenge, the mystics frequently use powerful images to convey the effort required from spiritual aspirants.

The following is an abridged version of a parable featured in *The Prodigal Soul*. The writer tells us that folklore supposed that snakes had a

jewel of great value embedded in their head, and for this reason they were once the prey of poachers. In the parable a poacher traps a snake and kills it to steal the jewel. A second snake outwits the poacher and so escapes the fate of its friend.

‘Heavy-to-carry’ and ‘Light-to-carry’ were two snakes whose bodies were each as large as the other’s, with tails of equal length also. Greatly attached to each other, they set off one morning and as they slithered and glided along the path, they shared with each other their hopes and aspirations, which they interspersed with jokes about hawks, falcons and all the other species that prey upon snakes. Eventually, however, the two snakes went their separate ways. One snake decided to investigate the hollow they had come across while the other continued with his journey.

Now, the path upon which the two snakes were slithering and sliding was flanked by a mountain on one side and an ocean on the other. Further ahead and, unbeknownst to our two friends, a poacher lay in wait, eager to catch any snake foolish enough to fall into the trap he had just created over a pit of burning hot coals.

Upon coming to the pit, the first snake kept to one side and watched the roaring fire. After a while, it decided to carry on with its journey and, without taking any time to assess whether he could reach the other side safely, decided to jump over the pit. However, the shape of the snake’s body was such that it was impossible for him, in effect, to take a gigantic long-jump. While it managed to get its head across, its body lay in the middle and its tail – far too long for the pit – remained on the other side. Nearby, the poacher watched the snake writhe in agony as it burnt to death. Seizing his opportunity, the poacher came out of hiding and, upon cutting open the snake’s head, left happy with a diamond in his hand.

After a while, the second snake came upon the pit and it cried out in pain as it found the mutilated body of its former companion. Tired and wrung out from mourning, it began thinking about its own fate. As it reflected on what had befallen its friend, the second snake reached a conclusion: the only way to clear the pit was to cut off its own tail. So, back it went to the depression and, finding an abandoned fire left by a shepherd, the snake burnt much of its tail in preparation for clearing

the pit. Once it became smaller, the now tailless snake jumped the fiery pit with ease.

The following excerpt is from a commentary included in *The Prodigal Soul* to help demystify the spiritual significance of the parable:

Of these two snakes, the first is the person who loves the body, for whom submission to self-discipline is troublesome, and who is unconcerned about the soul. His tail is long. The second snake is the person for whom the soul is dearer than the body... and because his attachment to the world is very weak, the fetters binding his soul are very weak.

The Prodigal Soul elaborates upon the explanation, noting that the mountain and the ocean flanking the path symbolize the physical universe, where temptations and spiritual ignorance keep the soul trapped on all sides. The first snake couldn't give up its body or material attachments, thus it burned itself in the fiery temptations of the material world, preventing it from journeying to higher spiritual planes. By contrast, the second snake symbolizes souls strong enough to overcome the distractions of the world. Specifically, the snake's use of the shepherd's abandoned fire to burn its tail exemplifies the way in which disciples can succeed by undertaking the spiritual discipline imparted by their Master. By subjugating the body and the attraction of the senses to their spiritual will, these disciples are liberated from desire and attachment. Once this occurs, the soul is granted entry to higher spiritual regions.



Food for Thought

The old way is the best way...



Wiles of the Mind

In the poem *Ratan Sagar*, the 18th-century mystic Tulsi Sahib and his disciple Hirdey discuss the ways in which the mind plays tricks on us, and how its deceptions can be overcome. At the poem's beginning, Hirdey cries out desperately to his Master and confesses:

*The wiles of mind are beyond limit and measure.
Moment after moment waves arise in the mind,
even as the surface of the ocean ceaselessly undulates.*

We can empathize with Hirdey's frustration: it seems almost impossible to stop the mind from projecting an uninterrupted stream of images that keep our attention outwards rather than inwards. These projections are a bit like graffiti: scribbles without apparent meaning – annoying, even destructive. Tulsi Sahib presents the fight with the mind as the ultimate struggle of life in which – continuing with Hirdey's analogy of the ocean – spiritual aspirants seek to travel from one shore to the other. However, since the ocean is stormy, and the waves so unrelenting and strong that they would crush our weak vessel, true masters help us navigate dangerous waters. They begin by telling us about the divine law of karma and that human beings are the only life form in which liberation may be attained. This, in turn, is contingent upon conquering the all-powerful mind.

The poem discusses the different ways in which people of yesteryear sought to attain inner peace. With our modern sensibilities, we may, for instance, view asceticism and pilgrimages as irrational and futile, believing any relief such measures may provide to be temporary. Yet, despite the science, reason, and rationality of which we are so proud, we are still on the same quest for everlasting peace, turning to books on mindfulness, health and life coaching, for example. True masters, on the other hand, try to dispel our misconceptions by emphasizing that intellectual understanding does not guarantee spiritual development. Accomplishments or fame from artistic or scientific work are also of no use in making the mind motionless. Perhaps the most serious problem with using outward-oriented remedies to seek

tranquillity and, by association, soothe the soul is that they, as Hirdey observes, 'raise false hopes'.

Baba Ji emphasizes the gravity of having our hopes falsely raised when he tells us that we will never attain spiritual liberation by holding on to incorrect ideas, myths, illusions and clouded thinking. It is easy to see that in our everyday life, the 'false hope' remedies do little to safeguard us from the five passions. These are anger, which causes us to lose our reason completely; lust, which blinds us with desire for sense pleasure; greed, which drives us to acquire possessions way beyond our real needs; attachment, which we mistake for love; and finally egotism which allows us to pursue our own glory whilst forgetting our concern for others.

Having described the different ways in which the mind takes control, Hirdey implores Tulsi Sahib to tell him how the saints subdue their mind. In response, Tulsi Sahib explains that the peace, tranquillity and freedom from the constant chatter of the mind which Hirdey is seeking is only attainable by taking refuge with a Master. The Master will teach the disciple that, whilst the body is much like a mansion with many courtyards and staterooms for interacting with the external world, it also has a place into which we can retreat. To reach this retreat and free our soul from the mind, all we need to do is to repeat the names given to us as instructed.

Repetition brings our scattered attention to a single focal point, the place described as 'the chamber of repose' in the *Ratan Sagar*. However, because of the concentration and effort it requires, we soon realize that repetition of the holy names, though simple, is far from easy. Tulsi Sahib reassures us that, with the help of the Master, meditation precipitates a marvellous transformation. In the same way that spring water becomes a lump of ice in cold weather but reverts to water when it melts in the sun, meditation will free our soul from the bondage of the mind and allow it to shine in all its glory.

The joy and tranquility that we are told awaits us upon opening the door to the chamber of repose is undoubtedly inspirational. Going by our own personal experience though, finding the so-called tenth door may seem impossible; and the state of super consciousness so far beyond

our daily experience that it begins to seem unreal and fantastical. In this condition, we are vulnerable to the mind which may undermine our spiritual awakening by making us believe that meditation is too hard; that the habits and power relationship between mind and soul is so deeply entrenched that we are rendered helpless.

But we cannot blame our failure to meditate on the mind. We have a choice. We can either be positive and do our meditation, or be negative and justify our failure to follow the Master's instructions. Each time we choose the latter, we make our Master's task harder. The Master follows the laws of the universe, so he can help us only if we give him something to work with. This is why true masters insist that it is not the quality of meditation which is important but consistent daily practice. Our tiny, daily offerings are enough for the Master to work his magic and make us fit to merge with the Divine.



The Disappointment of Inaction

Very soon your life here will end; consider, then, what may be in store for you elsewhere. Today we live; tomorrow we die and are quickly forgotten.... Therefore, in every deed and every thought, act as though you were to die this very day.... If you are not prepared today, how will you be prepared tomorrow? Tomorrow is an uncertain day; how do you know you will have a tomorrow?

If you have ever seen a man die, remember that you, too, must go the same way. In the morning consider that you may not live till evening, and when evening comes do not dare to promise yourself the dawn. Be always ready, therefore, and so live that death will never take you unprepared. Many die suddenly and unexpectedly, for in the unexpected hour the Son of God will come. When that last moment arrives you will begin to have a different opinion of the life that is now entirely past and you will regret very much that you were so careless and remiss.

Do not put your trust in friends and relatives, and do not put off the care of your soul till later, for men will forget you more quickly than you think. It is better to provide now, in time, and send some good account ahead of you than to rely on the help of others. If you do not care for your own welfare now, who will care when you are gone?

The present is very precious; these are the days of salvation; now is the acceptable time. How sad that you do not spend the time in which you might purchase everlasting life in a better way. The time will come when you will want just one day, just one hour in which to make amends, and do you know whether you will obtain it?

See, then, dearly beloved, the great danger from which you can free yourself and the great fear from which you can be saved, if only you will always be wary and mindful of death. Try to live now in such a manner that at the moment of death you may be glad rather than fearful. Learn to die to the world now, that then you may begin to live with Christ. Learn to spurn all things now, that then you may freely go to Him.

Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*

* * *

*Repeat God's Nam, O my mind,
or you will repent in the end.
You are given to avarice, O my sinful mind;
know that tomorrow – if not today –
you will depart from this world.
Beguiled by the illusion of maya,
you squander your life....
Take no pride in your wealth and youth –
one day you will crumble like a piece of paper.
The day Yama comes, grabs you by the hair
and dashes you to the ground,
you will find yourself utterly helpless.
If you do not practise simran and meditation ...
with what face will you go before Dharmrai,
the divine judge, when he calls you to account?
Listen, ... through the company of saints
you will sail across the ocean of existence.*

Kabir, Voice of the Heart

* * *

If you wish to ... meditate, then the time to start is right now. Procrastinating will produce many hindrances... You will follow your impulses and get caught up in countless distractions, while consoling yourself with the thought, "I can always practise later." Without allowing time for the mind to relax and become tranquil by meditating, you busily rush through life fulfilling each moment with things that "really must be done!" Each new year you resolve to begin Dharma practice seriously, but end up putting it off until next month, next year, then the next year until 'next' becomes next life!

*Geshe Acharya Thubten Loden, as quoted in *Buddhism: Path to Nirvana**

* * *

In twenty years, your inactions will disappoint you more than actions. Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do.

*H. Jackson Brown Jr. in *P.S. I Love You**



So, What Do You Do for a Living?

What do you do? This is a question we often ask strangers when we want to get to know them better. Sure, we *might* be interested in what job somebody does, but most likely our question is posed out of a habit reflecting societal expectation. Contemporary society not only places supreme importance on the individual but predominantly views identity through the prism of work and employment. Put differently, what we do to earn a living and how much we earn is valued far more than, say, learning to control one's impulses. However, mysticism, offering a completely different perspective, contends that our primary job has nothing to do with earning a living; rather, it is to discover *what* we are.

So, here's a different kind of conversation about what we do and who we are.

In answer to your question about what I do, well, my job focuses on human discovery.

Well, is that what you do for your living?

Yes, that's what I do for my living! But, my friend, my understanding of "living" and yours might be different, so let's start right there. My job has taught me that in everything we see before us is a life force and that life force comes from a single source of energy. Call it Energy, call it God, call it Spirit or Love, but we and everything we see around us originates from that one single energy source. When we feel frustrated by life, when we can't take it anymore, if we can just be at this calm place of our beginning, then we would see life with a completely different perspective. Can you imagine? Wouldn't our troubles and worries seem so insignificant?

If that's true, why is there so much suffering in the world?

Because we ignore one very simple law of nature: as you sow, so you reap. The life force moves from one form to the next, reaping the harvest of the actions performed by the mind. The mind does not stop. It performs new actions in response to situations that have come about because of previous actions. It seeks to be entertained anew, not realizing that it will have to pay – in more ways than one – for its desires to be fulfilled. And so it continues: birth, growth, decay, death, then rebirth and growth, again and again – the law of nature keeps on turning the wheel of life.

But is there no way to get off this cycle?

Yes, there is. As human beings we have the extremely rare opportunity to get off the cycle and return to the beginning. We can choose to take control of our mind and use it to expand our consciousness to such a level that we go back to the start – reunite with God, one could say. With an expanded consciousness we can choose to align our actions with our deepest spiritual nature. Not just with our animal nature; not just with our brilliant mind; but with our loving heart, with that compassionate ocean of pure being from where we came. Human life is our chance to escape the ignorance that has kept us imprisoned till now, simply by our *choosing what we do*.

It is hard to understand any of this if we approach it just with our brains. All that most of us know is that we are never fully content. That's why we have to work diligently on the voyage of self-discovery if we want to gain understanding. At the physical level we are programmed not to understand what we are, and at this level life seems to begin with birth and end with death. At the emotional level – stemming from our intelligence or from our religion – we may have some inkling that there is more to life than what we simply see. But if our spiritual heart is awakened to the grand order of life, if we learn to let our soul force lead us rather than body or mind and become superconscious, then we can actually start experiencing this liberating vision of what life really is. This surely has to be the greatest opportunity on offer! If we worked on ourselves to realize our true nature, we would experience complete bliss.

Wow! That sounds amazing!

Wow indeed! Because what I do for a living is not restricted to me but is open to all applicants. Science seeks to know the origin of life through technology, inspiration, and research by the world's most brilliant minds. Mystics say we can each know what life is by working on our consciousness. Our yearning can be answered. Our hunger for love can be abundantly fulfilled. Mystics say: Don't lose this opportunity by spending all your life in some other work; keep quality time to work on yourself. One day you are going to die, don't forget this.

The greatest job opportunity awaits you; it will reward you beyond your wildest dreams. What do you do for your living, my friend?



The Turning Place

*When you are fragile, bruised, and filled with fear,
when loneliness corners you in a dead-end alley,
and the only intimacy is the alienation of exile,
when your whole future stands shivering
in the shadow of a towering wall of pain,
and just to breathe cuts you
with the ice cold blade of emptiness,
know He has delivered you to the turning place.*

*He had to bring you here, or you would never stop
trying to squeeze little drops of happiness
from the diseased and dying bodies
of evanescent pleasures.
You would be doomed to running
in the race that never ends,
in a world of dreams that offers you
no real rest or reward.*

*Rather, dear traveller, face deliverance
on this starless night.
This grief is God's gift to a lost soul –
a lantern that shines within you –
and lights your lonely path to the turning place.*

*Sit down and close your eyes.
The mystic will remove your blindfold of tears,
wash the grief from your mind with Holy Names,
and set your soul in the Sacred Sound of Home.
Then you will see your bright destiny
unfold within you like a shining highway
leading out of this polluted city of broken love.*

*Welcome, sweet sad traveler, to the turning place.
Many were here before you and many will follow, still.
Some will end their suffering here,
others will turn back to their desires
and little losses, and die again and again, trying to win the day.*

*But never mind that, now.
You have come here on this fateful, starless night,
to the turning place – the final place of pilgrimage
on the map to the secret treasure
of the endless bliss and blinding Light of God,
hidden just behind the veil
of your broken-hearted dream.*



Where Has the Time Gone?

Throughout the year, we often find ourselves exclaiming to one another, “Where has the time gone! I can’t believe a whole week, month, year, has gone by.” For some reason, we seem to be constantly amazed by the passage of time. And whilst we adopt a jokey attitude, the fact that such a question arises suggests that, at some level, we’re a little uneasy. Moreover, the implication behind the question – where has the time gone? – suggests a gap between how we currently use our time and what we feel we should be doing.

Reminders about the passage of time often occur during moments of introspection as we assess whether our choices support or hinder the realization of a spiritual objective. This might coincide with a trip to the Dera or a visit from the Master. Whilst the question-and-answer sessions available on the internet have been of immense value during the pandemic and will continue to support us, his physical presence has been greatly missed. As the rules slowly relax, some of us are now able to look forward to attending the Master’s live satsangs again. This time, will we be able to channelize our love and gratitude into action?

Love, anticipation and broken promises

Maybe it’s because, in a global population of more than seven billion people, we are amazed by our inexplicably good fortune to be encountering a true Master. Or, maybe it’s because we hope Master’s darshan will inspire us to practise meditation more diligently. As soon as we catch sight of the road to satsang, our heart skips a beat, and a feeling of joy instinctively wells up inside us. Upon entering the Dera or any regional centre around the globe, our anxieties evaporate as we soak in the atmosphere and anticipate seeing the Master. Joining the congregation, we take our seats for satsang. Remarkably, the low-level noise of seekers settling down draws to a close thirty minutes or so before satsang commences and a hush falls over the sangat. Quiet and contemplative, each person is lost in their simran or private thoughts as they wait for their Master to arrive.

By now, the atmosphere is electric. Each time we hear a car door slam, we wonder: Is it him? Has he arrived? Finally, we see the Master walking

onto the stage and, as he greets us with folded hands, our heart is bursting, our soul is stirring, and we silently tell him that we would follow him to the ends of the earth if need be. In fact, throughout the time spent with the Master, our desire to be better disciples intensifies, and we begin to think about the changes we need to make to express our love more deeply.

But over the coming weeks and months, to what extent do our actions reflect the promises we made in Master's presence about prioritizing Sant Mat above all else? Like many unfulfilled new year resolutions, our resolve frequently wanes. There are three explanations for why we struggle to reflect our desire for spirituality in our actions.

A divided mind

In the shabd "The Divided Mind", Sant Kabir identifies the root cause behind our struggle. Writing metaphorically, he observes an ant forced to choose between carrying a grain of rice or a lentil, since it is impossible for her to pick up both. Concluding the shabd, Kabir writes:

*I have never seen happiness
In a kingdom where two hold authority
Nor in a person whose mind is divided.*

Kabir: The Great Mystic

Kabir is informing us that our inability to overcome this continual yo-yoing, between the disciple we are and the one we wish to be, is because our desire for spirituality does not – as yet – supersede all others. This is why, in the presence of the Master, we are brimming with enthusiasm and confidence about making Sant Mat the focal point around which everything else revolves. Over subsequent days and weeks, our material desires gradually dampen the intensity of our determination, and we find ourselves back to square one: approaching meditation half-heartedly.

Eradicate karma, eradicate desire

If we accept Kabir's explanation that our hearts and minds are divided, it seems logical that we should strive to desire nothing. Yet unlike the ant who can easily drop the grain of rice to pick up the lentil, eliminating

desire by sheer willpower is impossible. To be liberated from hankering for one object of desire after another, two things must happen: the destruction of all karma and reaching the stage of super-consciousness. Until then, we remain under the power of the mind – with its addiction to the pursuit of ephemeral pleasure – and therefore in danger of being thrown off our spiritual course. Returning to the original problem, then, this might leave us somewhat puzzled: if the only way to eradicate our desires is to reach a higher level of consciousness via meditation, but our desires are preventing us from meditating – are we caught in a Catch 22?

Clarity and complacency

Whilst maya is an essential factor explaining why we prioritize material gratification over spirituality, before we fatalistically throw our hands up in the air and attribute our difficulties to the human condition, clear thinking will enable us to make the spiritual breakthrough that we desperately need. As texts such as *Concepts and Illusions* and *A Wake-Up Call* emphasize, spiritual development is impeded by our remarkable ability to invent convenient illusions, which, in one way or another, justify our lazy approach to meditation. In this vein, we may wish to consider whether tackling complacency holds the key to ending our internal war. The “Parable of the Wise and the Foolish Builders”, as told in the Bible, helps expose weaknesses not previously considered.

The Gospels of Matthew and Luke state that Jesus narrated the parable about the two builders at the end of one of his sermons to emphasize the importance of putting his teachings into actual practice. Thus, by way of a warning to his listeners, Jesus likens the fate of disciples ignoring his commandments to the foolish builder whose house collapsed in the midst of a storm because its foundations were weak, having been built on sand. By contrast, those that remain steadfast with their spiritual practice are able to withstand even the fiercest storms, much like the wise builder who built his house on rock. Jesus deliberately chooses ‘rock’ as the place where the strong man builds his foundations to signify that his power is stronger than any calamity.

We are all too aware that when we try to turn our attention inwards, virtually everything else in our entire existence is drawing our attention

outwards. When combined with the karmic calamities befalling us from time to time, as well as our deeply ingrained habit of following the dictates of the lower mind, our spiritual journey can sometimes feel like swimming upstream. Yet, whilst the forces of maya and karma are strong, the power of the Master is much greater. Practising meditation as instructed would shield us from all of life's dramas and discipline the mind in much the same way that the house built on rock protected the wise man. However, despite the most powerful tools at our disposal – simran and bhajan – why are we locked in a loop that prevents us from being the disciple we know we can be? Is it possible that our meditation practice is not yet built on a solid foundation but is, instead, more akin to the man building his house on the sand? The extent to which our meditation is built on sand can be assessed by asking ourselves these simple questions:

- Do we practise meditation every day, firmly believing that missing a session is not an option?
- How much time do we devote to meditation? If this falls short of two and a half hours, could we look the Master straight in the eye and attribute this to personal circumstance, or are we using this as an excuse?
- When there are multiple calls on our time and we are obliged to fulfil a worldly demand, do we maintain a focus on the Master and reinstate our routine at the first opportunity?

Our responses to these questions may lead us to draw two conclusions: our failure to comply fully with the Master's instructions is the reason why our meditation practice is fragile, which in turn explains how we compromise our commitment to Sant Mat. Indeed, although he refrains from asking us the above questions so directly, in nearly every question-and-answer session, Baba Ji poses a rhetorical question to everyone, indicating that we can all do better. He is not asking us to improve our concentration, but to be honest with ourselves as to whether we consistently maximize our effort to prioritize spirituality above all.

Baba Ji poses that rhetorical question because until our desire for spirituality supersedes everything, we cannot escape imprisonment from the material plane. He is trying to dispel any lingering misconception that

our unsatisfactory effort to attain spiritual liberation will be overlooked just because the mystics embody love and compassion.

Living in accordance with the principles of Sant Mat and maximizing our effort to meditate is *our* responsibility. What counts as maximum effort will vary from disciple to disciple, reflecting our different abilities and our unique karmic load. However, like the poor widow in the Synoptic Gospels whose two-cent donation to charity was considered infinitely more valuable than the vast sums of money donated by the rich, the mystics expect us to devote our whole being to realizing our ultimate aspiration: spiritual liberation.

To help us, we may turn to the counsel offered by Maharaj Charan Singh in *Die to Live*:

Everything you do must consciously prepare you for the next meditation.



The One Good Hour

There was once a hard-hearted moneylender who always charged his debtors exorbitant interest. One day, to collect a debt from a poor farmer, he went to the farmer's village.

"The time has come to pay me," the moneylender told him roughly. "Give me the money I lent you, plus all the interest."

When the unfair interest was added, the sum was so large that the farmer could not possibly pay it.

"Reduce the interest," he requested. "It is unjust and far too much. Reduce it to a normal charge, and then I can repay you."

To his arguments the moneylender turned a deaf ear. Compassion and pity were things that had no place in his avaricious life.

"I see you will not pay me," he told the farmer. "You force me then, to appropriate all your cattle and your store of grain as interest. This I shall do at once."

"Take your luggage and leave my home this very minute!" the outraged farmer shouted. "You have a heart of stone."

In a small village such as the one the farmer lived in there were no porters to carry luggage, and the farmer had no wish to try and find someone who would be willing to carry the luggage for the moneylender. Far too proud to carry it himself, the moneylender stood looking at the ground and wondering what to do. As it happened, a holy man was sitting nearby in meditation. He had heard all that had gone on, and now spoke to the purse-proud moneylender.

"Sir," he said humbly, "I will be glad to carry your luggage for you. But it would please me if you would agree to one condition. This condition is that either you will talk to me in praise of the Lord, or you will listen to me as I speak of love and devotion to the Lord."

To this, the moneylender agreed at once, for it would be easy enough to go on listening to the saint, and would cost him nothing. The saint thereupon picked up the luggage, and as they walked to the moneylender's village and house, he spoke all the way of the Lord and his goodness.

When they arrived at the moneylender's village, the holy man gave him his luggage and got ready to leave. But before leaving, he thought to himself, "The moneylender is not going to forget this encounter with a man of God. Perhaps I should tell him what I know."

Addressing the moneylender, he said, “You are to die in eight days. Except for this one hour, you have nothing good to your credit. After your death, the angels of death will ask you if you want the merit of this one hour first or later. Tell them you want it first, and request them to bring you to the holy man who gave you the discourse. The rest you will see for yourself.”

A few days later the moneylender died. The angels of death took him to the lord of judgment who commanded the chief accountant of deeds to produce his account, and the record of his good and bad deeds was examined. The one and only good deed was the hour during which he had listened to the saint. The lord of judgment asked if he would like to enjoy the fruit of this good deed at once or later on.

“I would like to enjoy the fruit at once,” said the moneylender, remembering the saint’s advice. “Please take me to the saint with whom I spent the one good hour.”

Now, the bodies of saints reside in the world but their souls live in the higher spiritual planes. The moneylender was taken to the holy man who was meditating on the goodness of the Lord.

The saint saw him, “Brother, so there you are!” he said.

“Yes sir, with your grace I have arrived,” said the moneylender, “but the angels of death are waiting for me outside.”

Now, the angels of death cannot come near the Word. Both saint and moneylender sat for a long time in intense bliss, until at last the fruit of the one good hour came to an end. When that came about, the death angels called to the moneylender to leave the saint and come to them. But he did not move, for as long as the saint was one with the Word, the angels could not come near. Discomfited, the angels went back to the lord of judgment and complained about what had happened.

“Give up the moneylender as lost to us,” the lord of judgment said in solemn tones, “for neither you nor I can now approach him. When a saint meditates on the Word, it is so powerful that none of us can overcome it.”

The complaint of the lord of judgment is recorded in the *Adi Granth*:

Listen, you messengers of death: do not go anywhere near a saint. They are always absorbed in meditation, singing the song of God’s praise. Neither you nor even I can escape, once we enter their sphere.

Saints tell us that even a moment of satsang is more valuable than anything in this world.



The Final Word

Soul, Seek his Shelter

*O my Soul! meditate on him
who is the over Lord of kings and emperors.*

*My mind! Repose hope, in him alone, in whom all have confidence.
Shed all your clevernesses and take to the feet of the Guru.
My Soul! With ease and calmness dwell upon God's Nam.
Through the eight watches of the day, meditate upon the Lord
and ever sing the praises of the world illuminator.*

*Seek his shelter, O my Soul! Whom none equals in greatness.
By remembering whom great peace is obtained
and pain and distress absolutely touch man not.*

*Ever and for ever more perform the service of that true Lord Master.
In the company of Saints, the mortal becomes pure
and the noose of death is cut.*

*Make supplication before him who is the bestower of bliss
and the destroyer of dread.*

*He, to whom the merciful Master shows his mercy,
has his affairs adjusted forthwith.*

*The Lord is spoken of as the greatest of the great
and his seat the highest of the high.*

*God is without colour and mark. I cannot appraise his worth.
Have mercy on Nanak, O Lord! And bless him with your true Nam.*

Guru Arjan Dev Ji, Adi Granth



Steps to God-Realization

Source: Sixth Anuvaka, Bhrigu Valli, Taittiriya Upanishad

This story explores in a symbolic way how one can grow in spiritual understanding. It is based on a parable from the Vedas about a sage called Bhrigu and the stages of his God-realization. He is advised to sit in contemplation (tapas). And so he comes to various stages of understanding, beginning with the power of food, the most basic level of physical sustenance. He then proceeds to explore the role of prana (breath or life force), and later progresses to mind (manas) and intelligence or wisdom (vijñana), and finally to bliss (anand).

There was once a sage named Bhrigu in whose heart arose a deep desire to know Brahman, the Lord. He approached his father, Varun, who was a great Vedic scholar. Thus Bhrigu did not feel a need to go to any other teacher. He implored his father, saying: “I want to realize Brahman, the Lord. Please explain how I can realize the essence of Brahman.”

Varun explained to his son: “Food, *prana*, eyes, ears, mind, and speech are aids in realizing the Lord. The power of the Lord flows through all of them. Everything that you see in the universe, the power through which they originate, through which they live, and in which they re-enter after death, is Brahman. Realize that innermost kernel of spiritual self-knowledge – that is Brahman.”

Following his father’s words, Bhrigu observed abstinence and self-control, renounced the sense pleasures, and engaged in his spiritual practice of contemplation (*tapas*). Thus he realized that *amman* (food or sustenance) is Brahman, because all creatures are born through Brahman and by its nourishment they live and merge back in the earth after death.

He went to his father and told him what he had understood. His father did not say anything. He realized that Bhrigu had understood the material form of Brahman but had not yet reached its essence. Bhrigu needed to engage in contemplation again and concentrate more deeply. Varun knew that pointing out that his son’s understanding was incomplete would not benefit him. He therefore decided not to answer Bhrigu.

On not getting a reply from his father, Bhrigu said:” O Lord, if I have not understood you correctly, please explain how I can realize the essence of Brahman.”

Varun responded, “You are trying to understand the essence through *tapas* – contemplation. This contemplation is the means to know the Lord and so is fully adequate to help you realize the Lord.”

Bhrigu followed his father’s instructions and engaged in contemplation to realize the Lord. He came to the conclusion that *prana* (life force) is Brahman, because all the qualities that his father had told him about Brahman are present in prana. Prana gives life to everything. Through prana, one being gives life to another. Prana sustains life, and if prana is stopped, no one can remain alive. After death, everyone merges back into prana. It is a proven fact that a dead person does not have prana. Therefore, prana must certainly be Brahman.

Again, Bhrigu went to his father and narrated his experience. And once again, his father did not reply. Varun felt that his son had attained a certain subtlety compared to his first attempt, but he still had much to learn. Therefore, he felt it was better not to answer him, in order to increase his curiosity. So he did not reply to Bhrigu.

On observing his father’s silence, Bhrigu said: “O Lord, if I have not understood correctly, please explain how I can realize the essence of Brahman.”

Varun repeated the same instruction: “Try to engage in contemplation to realize the Lord. Concentration is the most important means of realizing the Lord.”

Bhrigu followed his father’s instructions and again engaged in contemplation to realize the Lord.

This time he inferred that *manas* (mind) must be Brahman, because it has all the qualities described by his father. All beings are born through the mind; they are sustained by the mind and, at the time of dissolution, they enter and merge back into the mind. Therefore, the mind must be Brahman.

Once again, Bhrigu rushed back to his father with his experience. His father did not reply. He understood that his son was diving more deeply than earlier, but he knew that he still needed to engage in concentration. So he remained silent.

Bhrigu again requested: “O Lord, if I have not understood correctly, please explain how I can realize the essence of Brahman.”

The father replied: Concentrate and realize the essence of Brahman. Reflect on my teachings and engage in *tapas*. Contemplation is the means of realizing Brahman. There is no other way to know Brahman.”

Bhrigu followed his father’s advice and engaged in contemplation again. This time, he came to the understanding that *vijnana* – intellect or wisdom – is Brahman. All the characteristics that his father had described to him are present in the intellect. Everything is accomplished by means of the intellect. By means of the intellect, the body is sustained. Therefore Bhrigu felt that the intellect must be Brahman. But then the following doubt arose in his mind: Sensation as pain and pleasure are experienced by the intellect – hence the intellect cannot be Brahman. Furthermore, the intellect motivates us to seek, to inquire. This must be transcended in order to arrive at the final stage.

Again, he reported this to his father, Varun, and once again, his father did not reply. He knew that Bhrigu was now very close to realizing Brahman. He had risen above both the gross and subtle elements. But Brahman is beyond all this – it is constant bliss; it is the peerless supreme soul. Varun knew that his son needed to contemplate even more deeply. Therefore he gave him no reply.

This did not disappoint Bhrigu. He again implored his father: “O Lord, if I have not understood correctly, please explain how I can realize the essence of Brahman.”

His father replied: Concentrate and realize the essence of Brahman. Reflecting on my teachings, engage in contemplation. Contemplation is the means of realizing Brahman.

Bhrigu followed his father’s advice and engaged in contemplation with more confidence and greater concentration than ever before. He realized that *anand* (bliss) is Brahman. The blissful Lord is within every soul. All creatures are the material form of bliss. That is why they have intellect and other partial characteristics of Brahman. All beings are born out of the blissful Brahman and are sustained by that bliss. No one wants to lead a miserable life. In addition, all creatures are living because of the omniscient Lord’s constant energy. If the sun and other elements do not

follow His command, beings cannot live here for a moment. The life force inside everyone is that blissful Lord. During dissolution, this creation merges back into Him. He is the source of everything. On experiencing this, Bhrigu realized the highest truth. He was not curious anymore.

The *Shrutis* also speak about realizing the supreme knowledge within oneself. This is the true knowledge as taught by Varun and experienced by Bhrigu.



BOOK REVIEW

The Jesus Prayer

BY BISHOP KALLISTOS WARE

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“How can we make prayer not merely something that we do, but something that we are?” This simple but profound question is at the core of this booklet on the Jesus Prayer. This tradition of prayer calls upon the practitioner to pray without ceasing, from the spiritual heart. Ceaseless prayer has the power to transform us simply because we tend to become what we do. Ware writes, “The effect of the Jesus Prayer has been rightly described as homecoming. It enables us to return home, becoming our own true self, the person whom God calls us to be.”

The Jesus Prayer is the most popular method of prayer in the Christian Orthodox Church. The prayer itself is ten words in English: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” It is a simple, direct appeal repeated continuously in a spirit of obedience, stillness, and surrender to the will of God. It is described as an “arrow prayer,” one that is, in the words of St. Augustine, “very brief and shot forth” from the heart of the devotee. The force behind that “arrow” is the devotee’s need for the divine Presence. It is a cry of the soul that Fr. John Main described as *maranatha*, an Aramaic phrase from the Bible meaning “Our Lord, come.”

Bishop Kallistos Ware, an English convert to Eastern Orthodoxy who became one of its best-known contemporary theologians, was introduced to this prayer at a young age. He describes an event from his youth that lit the fire of his yearning to know God. A preacher in his church recounted this story in his sermon:

Once there was an old man who spent several hours each day in church. “What are you doing there?” his friends enquired. “I’m praying,” he replied. “Praying!” they exclaimed. “There must be a great many things that you want to ask from God.” With some indignation the old man responded, “I’m not asking God for anything.” “What are you doing, then?” they said. And the old man replied, “I just sit and look at God, and God sits and looks at me.”

This was a pivotal moment for Ware, shattering and reforming his concept of prayer and devotion.

Throughout this little book Ware speaks directly to the longing within every spiritual aspirant to know God, and he outlines a simple and clear practice enabling them to fulfill it. Ware is practical, kind, and empathetic to the reader. He is aware of the difficulties of continuous prayer, acknowledging the struggle while offering positive and wise counsel.

As Ware explains, the Jesus Prayer originated with the Desert Fathers of Egypt in the 4th and 5th centuries, monks who sought the solitude of the desert to divest themselves of everything that was not for God and of God. They advocated the prayer as a way of simplifying and unifying the mind by focusing on the single purpose of meeting the Divine. Recited with intensity, the prayer creates recollection and continuous contemplation of the One. The simplicity of the practice also ensures that anyone can do it.

Although the Jesus Prayer is meant to be repeated throughout the day, it is most intensely practiced and experienced in times of stillness and silence, “when our whole attention is concentrated on the act of praying.”

The quest for stillness (*hesychia*) is at the heart of the prayer. Ware explains that silence leads to listening: the *hesychast*, or silent one, “is par excellence the one who listens, who waits expectantly upon the Spirit.” But one who seeks silence and listening is often assailed with distracting thoughts, “aimless and futile, irrelevant to the work of prayer.” While we cannot simply stop thinking, we can assign our “ever-active mind ... a simple and unifying task: the repeated invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus.” Here the simplicity of the Jesus Prayer helps: “Because the words ... are few and straightforward, and because they are regularly repeated, it is a prayer that leads us through words into silence.”

The stilling of the mind is aided by the elimination of all images at the time of prayer. Evagrius of Pontus (346-399) advised, “Do not shape within yourself any image of the Deity, and do not let your intellect be stamped with the impress of any form.” Other Christian texts such as *The Cloud of Unknowing* (an anonymous text of the 14th century) and *The Dark Night of the Soul* (by Saint John of the Cross in the 16th century) also call for dwelling upon God’s “total and immediate presence,” not any image. Thus, not only thoughts but also icons, imagination and projections are set aside; there is simply a waiting, watching, and listening. As Ware states, “We think solely of Jesus himself.”

Instead of emphasizing what we want to get rid of, let us rather concentrate on what we hope to acquire. Instead of saying to ourselves, "Drive out all distracting thoughts," let us say rather, "Think with loving tenderness of the Saviour Jesus." What we are seeking is not so much a mind stripped of images as a heart full of love. Images and thoughts will constantly rise up within us. Let them recede into the background. In the foreground, put Jesus.

By using words that invoke the presence of God, the Prayer creates "an integral connection between the name and the one who is named." For "to call upon a person by name is to render that person dynamically present." Ware quotes the 20th-century French author George Bernanos: "Silence is a presence at the heart of God." With practice, that presence pervades every thought and activity. As Ware says, "We begin to see all things in Christ and Christ in all things." The immanence of this presence is such that, as Ware says, "Even when we are not reciting the Prayer, yet at a profound level of our being an awareness of God's love has not ceased to be present within us, like an afterglow following the sunset."

Ware distinguishes three levels of the Jesus Prayer: of the lips, of the mind, and of the heart. Besides reciting the words, John Climacus (6th-7th-century Christian monk at the monastery on Mount Sinai) urged us to "contain our mind within the words." Especially at the beginning, the words may be spoken aloud, but with practice and increased attention they become internalized. The final stage is when the prayer comes from the heart – "heart" meaning primarily not the emotions and feelings but "the spiritual centre of the total human being ... the focal point of our personhood as created in the image and likeness of God." The heart comprises emotions, will, and reason, but also "the higher visionary faculty known in Greek as the *nous*, whereby we apprehend the glory of God."

Containing the attention within the silence and stillness opens up our relationship with God, for then his voice can be heard. As it says in the Bible, "Speak, Lord, for Your servant hears." Ware concludes, "Silence, then, properly understood, implies not isolation but relationship ... a losing and finding of oneself in the Other." This Other is Jesus Christ, the one who is "fully and entirely God and at the same time fully and entirely human, one single person in two complete natures." With the deepening of the prayer it is not we who pray but Christ who prays within us. As Saint Paul says in the Bible, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me."

The mystical tradition within Orthodox Christianity also teaches that the faithful use of this prayer can lead to the gift of the light of transfiguration. “This light that is beheld during prayer is not a physical and created light, but spiritual and uncreated.” St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359) taught that this divine light is nothing less than the “eternal energies of God.”

The practice of the Jesus Prayer and its foundation on stillness and inner contemplation is becoming more prevalent within modern Christian theology. It has a universal appeal, and its foundation of simplicity, consistency, and discipline can be adapted to almost any religious or spiritual endeavor. Ware concludes:

Yet we should not claim concerning the Jesus Prayer “It is the only way.” Nor should we assert, “It is the best way.” But this at least we may say: “It has helped many; it has helped me; perhaps it will also help you.”

