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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre
Guru Ravi Dass Marg, Pusa Road, New Delhi-110005, India
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Happy New Year

At the start of every year we have the opportunity to reflect on what we have done in the previous year, and to consider how we might improve in the year to come. A summary of what might be the first week of introspection comes from the English poet, W. H. Auden, who writes,

*Well, so that is that. Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes – ...
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully –
To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers....*

So far, the poet describes the familiar experience of holidays, high expectations accompanied by the mixed reality of both good and bad. But the poem then goes deeper:

*As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away,
Begging though to remain His disobedient servant,
The promising child who cannot keep His word for long.*

These words might haunt an initiate: “We have seen the actual Vision.” Translate this to mean that we have seen the Master. We have accepted the teachings and we have received his invitation for God-realization. But have we dedicated our heart, mind, and soul to that vision on a daily basis? Or do we merely entertain the goal of merging with the Shabd, the Word, as an “agreeable possibility,” somewhere in the far distant future? Do we send the Master away? Do we make lots of resolutions to make our simran and our meditation practice our first priority, only to continue on as before, remaining “His disobedient servant”? Are we the child who makes lots of promises but who does not follow through with simran and meditation (“keep His word”)?

Long ago, Sardar Bahadur Jagat Singh wrote a New Year’s message to the sangat that is just as timely today, and can help us reinvigorate our

commitment to the path as we face the challenges and opportunities of a new year:

Let the dying year with all its memories and regrets, pleasant and unpleasant, bring home to us the impermanence, and unreality of what we behold, and strengthen our resolve to rise above the phenomenal existence and reach the glories of the word, the Nam that was, is, and will be.

The soul is the same essence as Nam, and will enjoy real bliss only when it reaches the region of Nam and becomes one with Nam. You have been initiated into this mystery. It behooves you, therefore, to travel the path, as far as possible, for this is the only thing that really matters. But we are not to neglect our worldly duties. With a heart full of love and faith, devote yourself to the task. Also discharge your worldly obligations. With this motto as your guiding principle, may the New Year bring you success and happiness.

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

The Masters encourage us to step out of the constraints and delusions of this phenomenal existence. How do we do this? Of course, by meditation. This is the great work of our lives: to meditate, two and one-half hours every day – last year, in the upcoming year, and as long as we are here. This is the vow we take, the promise we give when we receive initiation. The task often seems impossible, as we navigate each new year, with all of its joy and grief, tribulation and satisfaction, hope and disappointment. But we have the Master by our side. Rumi says it beautifully: “In this sea, all is gift and reward. You [the Master] give only favour and support.”

Hafez, too, gives us advice on how to face our destiny and our often rocky journey home: “The wilderness of love is full of mountains to climb, valleys to cross. O where is the lion-heart that does not shrink from these? Pray for long life, and resilience.... Hafez, lay down your head on the sill of submission.”

What does that “sill of submission” look like? In a beautiful video on seva, on the RSSB website, a powerful shabd by the Indian saint Tukaram is sung while sevadars are having darshan: “Whether you ferry me across

or drown me, I shall always remain in your will.... Please, O Lord, grant me the boon, that I should not ask for anything from you.”

Complete trust. Complete faith. Surely, that is what laying our head down on the sill of submission means. Believing, even knowing, that whatever he gives us is to our spiritual benefit. In whatever circumstances he places us, we have a companion and the favour and support of the Master. Each of us has a certain destiny to face in the coming years. Hafez advises us to develop a lion-heart, and to nurture the kind of resilience that will allow us to persevere. And more than that, to develop the ability to keep our focus on the path of the Masters.

Hafez reminds us that even in the best of circumstances, there will be challenges, but we can prevail, because we have the support of a companion, our Master:

The garden sees many roses come into bloom, but no one has ever picked one without suffering the pain of the thorn. Hafez, expect no happiness from this turning sphere, for it has a thousand faults and does us no favours....

Look at the profit and loss of the world's bazaar and all life's tribulations. If that does not convince you, for us it is quite enough. A companion beside me. What more could I want?... For in all the world, the end of your street is enough.

Maybe the end of his street is enough for us as well. We have been taken into the Master's neighborhood. We know where he lives – at the eye centre. Eventually, all of us will meet him there. It is our great task to do that one part he has given us – our meditation. He will do the rest. It is our privilege to lay our heads down on the sill of his doorway, the sill of submission. Hafez expresses our circumstances beautifully when he says, “My eyes are filled with tears of longing for the dust at that door.”

We want to be where the Master is. Lucky for us, the Master accepts all kinds of initiates: lazy and hardworking, obedient and disobedient, those of us who remember to do our simran and remember God no matter what we are doing, and those of us who are so forgetful that it is staggering. Nevertheless, our course is set. As Hafez confesses, “Though Hafez is steeped in sin, surely he is on his way to heaven.” This is the grace

the Master promises every disciple. There will be a reunion. There will be God-realization. Our destiny is Sach Khand and unimaginable joy.

In December of 1987, Maharaj Charan Singh wrote his initiates a beautiful New Year's message, in which he explains what the Master will do for us in the time ahead and the love we can count on, now and forever:

The Master, who initiates us, assumes a very heavy responsibility. He will not relax his hold until he has escorted us back to Sach Khand – the eternal home of peace and bliss. He ... accompanies us right up to the end of the journey. All of our friends and relatives leave us, but this true friend remains always with us in this world, as well as in the next. He stands by us.... He takes our burden on his own shoulders and pays the ransom needed to free us of our sins, and to see us safely through this realm of the prince of darkness. Even if we give him up, he will never desert us, for he knows his responsibility, and is true to his vows.

RS Greetings Magazine, Winter, 1987

May our meditation practice be the one New Year's resolution we keep: to make meditation our first priority and never sacrifice it to anything in this world. In this coming year, let us stay true to our vows and forget the dying year of memories and regrets and discover the mystery that awaits us.



I Am Ready

Scenario: Our boss pops into our office to remind us of an upcoming presentation we have to make to clients. The words “I’ll be ready” slip easily off our tongues, even though we have barely started the preparation. We have been dealing with all the unexpected issues that fill our lives: an emergency visit to the dentist, a trip to pick our kids up early because of an unscheduled teachers’ meeting, and other critical things that need our immediate attention.

Now the deadline for the presentation – with the added stress of an upcoming visit to our home by out-of-town guests – is only days away, but “it’s okay,” we say to ourselves. We work well under pressure. So we pull a couple of all-nighters, and we get it done. Maybe not our best work, but we are ready. We give our presentation and we greet our guests into our not-quite-as-tidy-as-we-would-like-it home, heaving a sigh of relief that once again we dodged the bullet. We were ready on time – barely.

Is this how we manage our meditation? Do we keep putting it off by telling ourselves it’s okay because we have plenty of time? “Don’t worry, Master, I will be ready when my deadline comes.” Are we not thinking? “Dead” line means “dead.” End of life.

The problem with this analogy is that the way we manage our lives – procrastinating but still squeaking through – doesn’t work for treading on our spiritual path. It doesn’t work at all for meditation. We have no idea when our deadline will be. Years from now? Or months, weeks, days or hours? Perhaps minutes, seconds, breaths? We cannot cram for the final examination in Sant Mat. If we have not been doing our meditation all along, it will be too late when the doctor says we have only a few months to live; too late when the axe falls on our silver cord, and our life is cut short. “I will be ready” is meaningless without the cumulative effect of daily meditation over time.

How long ago were we given the assignment for the work project? A few weeks? How long have we been expecting that visit from our out-of-town friends? A few months? How long ago were we given our initiation? Whether only a short time ago or longer – twenty, forty, fifty years – we need to pace ourselves.

Doesn't our Master tell us just that? "Pace yourself." Often, he's talking about the mundane aspects of our lives. We typically find time for whatever needs to be done in our worldly life. We eat every day, so we find time to do grocery shopping; we put the time aside to cook. Our cardiologist tells us that if we don't lose weight and exercise, we will die sooner than later. So we take long walks, work out, change our diet, and get a little healthier every day. But do we think about applying this advice to our meditation?

Have we been pacing ourselves by doing our meditation regularly every day? Or are we planning to do intensive meditation at the last moment, just before we die? How is that going to help? Can we reach the eye centre after a few days of practice? If that were true, all initiates would be inside right now, enjoying the bliss of merging in the Shabd, the Creator within us. If we waste our lives, we can't make that up at death. It will be too late. If we don't pace ourselves, we won't be able to say, "I am ready, Master."

Sant Tukaram warns:

*Do your meditation, for the end is drawing nigh.
Ignore all the useless words around you
And devote yourself only to the Lord's Word.*

Tukaram says that the end of our life is near. He advises us to pay no attention to the "useless words" around us – to the people, places, and things that tie us to the creation. They are useless because they distract us from our goal of reaching the eye centre and making contact with the inner Word, the Shabd. We must devote ourselves to the inner spiritual path *now*. Devote ourselves to our meditation – our bhajan and simran – every day. Do our simran during the day, because it is the tool our Master has given us to still the mind – even during the day – and reach the eye centre. Simran is our call to the Master, our call for his support 24/7. Simran is our refuge from the mind. Simran helps us to strengthen our will. It helps us to stay firm in making the right choices during the day that will support our meditation.

Maharaj Charan Singh points out that we are vulnerable to temptations only when we are scattered away from the eye centre: he says, simran "keeps you concentrated at the eye centre; it keeps your

thoughts at the eye centre.” So let’s turn to our simran as we navigate this world. Simran is an action we can take.

Doing simran can help us not to deviate from our shopping list when we wander through a grocery store. Do we actually need three gallons of ice cream, even if it is on sale? Indulging our senses with ice cream in excess does not support the health of our body, the vehicle for our meditation. Instead, turn to simran and move on.

Simran is how we pace ourselves. If we want to be ready for the deadline of all deadlines at the end of our lives, we can pace ourselves and prepare daily by turning to our simran any time of the day when our minds are not occupied.

Kabir Sahib says in *Kabir, the Weaver of God’s Name*:

*Day and night, over and again,
Repeat, repeat his Name....
While sleeping or awake, relish,
Relish the ambrosia of simran....
Without it you’ll not find freedom.*

Let us relish our simran and do it with joy. Do it because it makes us happy. Do it because it takes us within. Do it until we reach the eye centre and go within to the waiting arms of the Shabd Master. That’s the goal, that’s the ideal, but we have to work up to it because this is a life-long path. That means every day we pace ourselves, do our meditation, do our simran and bhajan so that when our final deadline comes, we can say with confidence, “I am ready, Master.”



Journey into the Unknown

Sant Mat is a journey of the soul in search of self- and God-realization. Yet, because the soul has been trapped in this creation for aeons, we languish in a state of spiritual ignorance while attempting this journey into the unknown. No matter what we learn about this path through our intellects – by reading books and listening to satsangs – ultimately only our own experience, under the guidance of a living Master, can light our way forward.

We can't base our faith on another person's experience. We must conduct this experiment with the truth for ourselves. As with any journey, we may encounter obstacles. If we can't remove them, we must navigate around or through them with the help of a living Master. Only saints can lead us back to the Father. As Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh tells us, saints "give us strength and support and drag us towards the Father."

We may think we have sought and found the Master, but apparently neither he nor we have any choice in the matter. Hazur explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I:

Nobody is initiated unless he has to be initiated. Neither the disciple has any choice, nor the master has any choice. All souls belong to the Father, and the master is engaged only to collect those souls, to bring them back to the Father.... They belong to him who has marked them for a particular shepherd. So when the shepherd whistles, all who are marked for him automatically flock around him. He has no right to refuse any, and they have no option but to go to him.

The Master pulls his disciples under his protection; he becomes our designated driver on our cosmic bus ride home, so to speak. In an ideal world, we would just need to fasten our seat belts and enjoy the ride. Intellectually, we may accept that the Master is our designated driver and that all we need to do is follow his instructions and all will be well. But sometimes our cosmic bus feels out of control – as if we're careening down a mountain road with no guard rails, or stuck in the mud in the middle of the night in a fog so dense we can't see our hand in front of us.

But our journey only *feels* as if it's out of our control, because we're not running the show. Like the Yiddish proverb says: We plan; God laughs. The Lord has arranged our destiny so that we experience only what is in our spiritual interest. We may want pizza and ice cream, but we may get tofu and spinach.

Our feelings of helplessness often terrify us. But resisting our helplessness only makes everything worse. We have to find the courage to face our fears and embrace our experience, which may feel at times overwhelming and unacceptable. So how do we navigate the mud and the fog, the silence and the darkness – our discomfort – if that's our experience? How do we find our way through our loneliness, emptiness, despair or fear? Through trust, patience, courage and persistence.

One condition we might experience along the way is what Hazur used to call “the void and vacuum.” Someone asked Hazur, as recounted in *Die to Live*: “What advice would you give to ... a satsangi who all of a sudden finds himself in a dry period where he just can't seem to meditate? What should he do?”

Hazur replied:

Definitely sometimes we feel that vacuum, that dryness, that loneliness. That often happens with satsangis because the things in life which once interested them no longer interest them. Before they were satsangis they were attached to worldly things. In the morning they would get up and think about their wife and children, their daily work, their wealth and position, and their mind would be happy in all those things. But now those worldly things don't attract them any more, and inside they're not getting what they want, so they feel as though they're stagnating in a vacuum.

That vacuum period definitely comes in everybody's life, and it is to our advantage.

Even during such dry periods, Hazur tells us, we are making progress within. We all have to pass through what feels like stormy weather: “The sun is shining, and then a thick, dark layer of cloud comes and you cannot see the sun, but the sun is always there.”

Hazur tells us those thick, dark clouds will pass. He advises us to “just continue” our meditation, no matter what we may be feeling, or how

impossible meditation may seem to us. In *Die to Live*, when someone asks Hazur, “What is the remedy when the mind rebels too much against meditation?” Hazur replies, “The remedy is only one: to attend to meditation again, to persist and not to give up.”

During this time of void and vacuum, as we try to live the Sant Mat way of life and attend to our meditation, it’s natural to lose interest in worldly affairs. Things that used to engage and absorb us no longer attract us. Hazur says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, “We have to pass through that stage sooner or later because nothing in the world attracts us anymore and we find nothing else within to hold our attention. So, we start feeling very lonely, and we feel a void in our life.” And then he says: “There is nothing to feel frightened about.” Hazur explains that sooner or later we all realize that we’re alone in life; “to think otherwise is just a self-deception.” He tells us that loneliness is the Lord’s way of pulling us towards him. If we didn’t feel that loneliness, maybe we would never think about the Father. But, he says, “We react back, we rebound back from all this, and then we turn to the Father to seek that bliss and peace and happiness within.”

We need to remember that our experiment with the truth is a long journey and a gradual process, during which both patience and trust are required. Knowledge and “book learning” won’t help us merge with God, the formless Shabd – rather, we must cultivate love for the journey and faith in the Lord and Master. We can do this only through meditation. Meditation awakens the dormant love of the soul for its source. It is an act of trust. We hand ourselves over to the Master. We open ourselves to the darkness, the emptiness, the silence – whatever we experience, even if it’s just the chattering of our own minds. We have to trust the mystery of this path, the mystery of all that we cannot know until we finally let go of our minds.

In letting go, only our personal inner experience matters. Only our meditation – regardless of how feeble we may judge it to be – can fan the flickering flame of love within us into the bonfire that will incinerate our karmas that keep us ignorant of the Lord’s inner presence. Only our meditation can support us through the painful and disorienting experience of being alive on this worldly plane.

Our trust is tentative until we've risen above the mind. In the meantime, we can try to keep our minds open and not come to premature conclusions about our experiences, in our meditation and our life. In the book *The Face Before I Was Born*, a Sufi teacher wrote: "There is great freedom in not knowing, and trusting that if one needs to know, that knowledge will be present. Emptiness is central to the path. Sometimes understanding or knowledge will come into the emptiness; at other times one remains happily unknowing."

Persisting on this path requires a certain strength of will – but not will in the sense of willpower; more in the sense of loving intention. Paul McCartney beautifully expresses this in the Beatles song "I Will":

*Who knows how long I've loved you
You know I love you still
Will I wait a lonely lifetime
If you want me to, I will*

Our soul has always been in love with its Creator. At initiation, we set our intention to live in God's will and cultivate his love, no matter how long it takes. When the soul reunites with its source, it awakens to the fact that it has never really been separate. Until that time, during our journey into the unknown, we might echo the song's conclusion:

*And when at last I find you
Your song will fill the air
Sing it loud so I can hear you
Make it easy to be near you
For the things you do endear you to me
You know I will*

Yes, I will follow the vows I took at initiation as best I can. Yes, I will attend to my meditation. I will open myself to experience the teachings and your loving presence in my life, even when I don't understand them. I will embrace and surrender to the mystery of all that I don't know. I will wait until your song fills the air and brings me near you. If you want me to wait a lonely lifetime, I will.



The Inner Sanctuary of Meditation

*There was a man who was so disturbed
By the sight of his own shadow
And so displeased with his own footsteps
That he determined to get rid of both.*

*The method he hit upon was to run away from them.
So, he got up and ran.
But every time he put his foot down
There was another step,
While his shadow kept up with him
Without the slightest difficulty.*

*He attributed his failure
To the fact that he was not running fast enough.
So, he ran faster and faster, without stopping,
Until he finally dropped dead.*

*He failed to realize that if he merely stepped into the shade,
His shadow would vanish,
And if he sat down and stayed still,
There would be no more footsteps.*

Chuang Tzu, *Flight from the Shadow*

This story describes the human condition. Like the poor man trying to outrun his shadow, most of us are running to escape the things we dislike and capture the things we desire. Unfortunately, there is no outrunning the mind, as it keeps up without the slightest difficulty. Yet, if we choose to “step into the shade,” we can move away from the world into the inner sanctuary of meditation. Through meditation, we learn to sit down, stay still, and tap into the inner peace we are seeking.

No matter how fast we run or how far we travel, we cannot escape the mind. In meditation, we discover that the mind is never still; it is rearing and bucking, using all methods to avoid our efforts to focus. It quickly jumps from one distraction to another, using the five passions – lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego – to push our attention outward.

Meditation is both an inner sanctuary and an internal struggle. But the Masters assure us that any and all attempts at meditation move us in a positive direction.

The challenge is to persist, especially when the mind offers resistance. Until we taste the sweetness of Nam, meditation is something that threatens the ego's very existence. Therefore, we must practise with patience and persistence and hold fast despite the struggle. By persisting, we will find that meditation reverses patterns that have been in place for countless lifetimes.

Turning our attention inward can begin with simply doing one round of simran. As we navigate through the world with our attention scattered in all directions, and the mind running wild like a mad elephant – at any given moment, we can remember the Master by doing our simran. Simran is our link with the Master. Simran grows love, and it strengthens, nurtures, and cultivates our relationship with the Master.

Simran is his gift to us. It is a standing invitation, available to us at any time. Simran is how we replace thoughts of the world with thoughts of the Master. Every round of simran redirects our attention toward him. Simran provides a refuge at any time, in any place, under any circumstance. The five holy names given to us at initiation are charged with the Master's spiritual power. Repetition, given to us by him and invested with his power, is our link to the Master.

Again and again, the mystics urge us to put our best effort into our meditation, but they tell us that the results of our meditation are in the hands of the Lord. When we practise meditation, we are knocking on the door of the Master and seeking refuge in him – not as perfect disciples, but as profoundly imperfect human beings. Maharaj Sawan Singh says:

If you go to the door of the Lord or the Master, go as a beggar. There is no one else before whom one should bow. He is the only one who can listen to the prayer of one who is caught in the whirlpool of Maya. He is the only one who can put healing ointment on the heart that is bleeding from attachment and greed.

Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. III

In meditation, we seek refuge in the Lord with an attitude of humility and gratitude – as a beggar before his door. We knock on his door through our simran, done with love. And we seek refuge in bhajan – listening for the sound – which is essential to our spiritual practice. Meditation is truly our sanctuary from the noise and the pull of the world. The time that we give daily to spiritual practise is sacred. It is our small way of expressing gratitude to the Master, the means through which we enter the real inner sanctuary and gain firsthand experience of reality. Maharaj Jagat Singh writes in *The Science of the Soul*:

The best and most appropriate way of appreciating his kindness and expressing our gratitude is to give more and more time to bhajan and simran, so that we may go in and contact Nam, and thus have a firsthand experience of everything.



Put Gratitude into Action

When he turned eighty years old, Henry Moore, the sculptor, was asked for the secret to life. His answer:

The secret of life is to have a task, something you devote your entire life to, something you bring everything to, every minute of the day for your whole life. And the most important thing is – it must be something you cannot possibly do.

Quoted in Twyla Tharpe, *Keep it Moving*

How does this quote apply to a meditation practice that will lead us to God-realization and reunion with the Lord from whom we originated? First and foremost, meditation is indeed a task to which we've committed our entire life. Second, we know that we must be prepared to bring everything we have to its practice. Third, this path is 24/7, so we are expected to spend every minute of every day in a manner that prepares us for the next morning's meditation. Finally, meditation that brings us back to the Lord is something we cannot possibly do alone or unaided. We could never attain self-realization and, ultimately God-realization, without the grace of a true living Master. Given this fact, we need to have everlasting gratitude for our great, good fortune in having come to this path – and put that gratitude into action.

Gratitude is being appreciative of what we have been given in our lives – a comfortable home, a loving family and friends, good health, and so on. But, let's consider for a moment the possibility that being grateful is not just about feeling appreciative or saying thank you to someone for a gift or kindness.

Genuine gratitude must be transformed into action. For example, suppose a parent gives a son or daughter a loan with the expectation that the child will use the funds wisely. If the child uses the money irresponsibly, chances are their words of thanks will take on an air of insincerity. However, if that same child uses the loan prudently, they will have demonstrated to the parent that the outward expression of thanks was genuine, as exhibited by action. Likewise, saying thank you to the Master is insufficient unless we transform our gratitude into action. And the best action we can do is to put

forth sincere effort in our meditation practice. So gratitude, expressed by our sincere effort is the best way to thank the Master for all the blessings we have been given, both temporal and spiritual.

Spiritual practice is like the two wings on a bird, one wing being grace and the other effort. Grace and effort are so closely intertwined that one cannot exist without the other. It is grace that puts us on the path and creates the perfect circumstances for us to attend to our spiritual practice. Then, the more effort we put forth, the more grace we experience. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

When the Lord wants us to go back to him, he creates those circumstances, that atmosphere which makes us think about him, about the path, the way leading back to him. Without his grace, we will never come on the path or on the way of devotion; or, in other words, we will never come in contact with the saints at all without his grace.... But we ourselves have to work; we have to make ourselves receptive to his grace.

The Lord has given us a human birth, the gift of initiation, and the grace to put forth the effort. Our effort is the best way to show our thanks for this grace. A questioner asked Hazur, "Since masters or saints always give their grace, where does the value of effort come on the path?" In response, he answered:

You see, you will feel the pull from within to sit in meditation, to achieve something within. That is the grace. Now grace is pushing you to make the effort, making you sit in meditation, making you awake early in the morning, and making you feel guilty the whole day if you don't attend to your meditation. That is all grace. That is forcing you to put in effort. So saints have their own way of giving grace.

When the Lord gives us those gifts – the atmosphere, the circumstances, the longing – we show our gratitude by putting forth the necessary effort. Hazur explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

We are all beggars at his door, so we should all do our best and leave everything to him. Of course, we will only get when and what he wants us to get, but we must make the effort by doing the spiritual practice.

And I assure you, if we really beg from our heart, he is always ready to give. If we come one step, he comes ten steps to receive us. But our devotion must be pure; our longing, our desire to merge back into him must be absolutely one-pointed. We have to love him for his sake.... We have to base all our worship and meditation on the foundation of love. Only then will we get the best results.

When our gratitude is sincere, we demonstrate that sincerity by attending to our meditation with one-pointed love and devotion, slowly turning our back to the world and its attractions. Doing so is the best way to progress toward our ultimate goal, God-realization.

Let us be open to the grace that the Lord is showering on us rather than resist it. Let us show our gratitude by making the efforts his grace allows. With his grace and our effort, the impossible becomes possible, and we learn the secret of life. It is never too late to start.



The Improvisational Disciple

A particular kind of stand-up comedy, in which comedians perform jokes and skits in front of an audience, is called “improvisational,” or “improv” for short. This type of performance demands spontaneity on the part of the actors. Responding to incoming suggestions and comments from the audience, the unrehearsed, spur-of-the-moment skits require flexibility, openness, and comfort with the unexpected. One might dismiss this comedy as merely a form of entertainment and distraction. But this difficult theatrical craft has some spiritual lessons to teach us.

Some of the central techniques of improvisation offer insight into how to spend a lifetime in pursuit of God-realization. Four of the instructions given to aspiring comedians are:

1. Say “yes” whenever possible (within moral and reasonable boundaries).
2. If you are standing on stage with three other actors, you will have, at most, only one quarter control of the outcome.
3. Work with the material given to you.
4. Forget yourself and listen to your fellow actors with intensity and focus.

How are these comedic principles applicable to spiritual seekers? The first rule is to say “yes.” What does it mean for an initiate always to be saying yes? We acknowledge that whatever the Master asks us to do, whatever challenges are put before us, whatever opportunities for service present themselves to us, we will answer in the affirmative. We will enter every relationship and encounter with a positive attitude. When we say “yes,” we are not saying that we will always meet with success or happiness. We are saying that we will do our best, knowing that our Master only gives us what is for our spiritual benefit. Practically speaking, that means we would say *yes* when stuck in a traffic jam. We would say *yes* to the weather. It also can mean saying *yes* to our limited capacity to be the disciple we aspire to be, and *yes* to however long it takes to get to the eye centre.

The second teaching of improv is that while interacting with our fellow actors on the stage, and with the audience attending each performance, we have very little control over the situation. It is the same way in the cosmic

dance of every individual. Each of us has a definite role to play, but our part is infinitesimally small. We are not in control of how any particular drama in our lives is going to play out. There are too many variables. In improv, who knows what the audience will suggest or what our fellow actors will say? In a disciple's life, who knows how the people at work will respond to us? Who knows what our family will do on any given day? Seeing all the complex layers of interplay we have with so many souls, it is good to be reminded of the need to let go of any fantasies that we control our children, our spouse, our friends, or our fellow citizens. Each of us has a part to play in the drama of our karmic story.

Third, we all need to work with the raw material of our lives – all of it. We might wish we had a better script, more rehearsal time, more talented cast members, or a grander theatre. But in improv comedy, one's capacity to take the given material and weave it into a compelling story is the secret to being effective and funny. Similarly, in life, being willing to work with what has been given to us (and what we must have karmically earned in other lives) is the beginning of surrender. The Masters teach us that our desire for *more, different, better* is endless and ultimately futile. In contrast, accepting the limitations and opportunities of our unique circumstances helps us to experience more appreciation, satisfaction, and contentment.

The fourth instruction is to forget oneself and listen intently, with focus. Listening is at the very heart of Surat Shabd Yoga. We have been instructed to forget about the self and to pay attention to something far greater. We are told to listen for the miraculous Sound Current that dwells within us. This Shabd surrounds us, sustains us, and permeates our life. Listening means paying attention to that love and mysterious energy that brought the sun and stars into being. When we listen during the bhajan portion of our meditation, we are trying to hear the power and the beauty that we sense in the Masters. We are trying to attune ourselves to what ultimately matters, to what is eternally true, and to the music that will take us to a place of infinite joy. We are told that even paying attention to the silence, even to the faintest echo of the Sound Current, prepares us to eventually listen to the majestic and ecstatic music that will pull us to God.

Very few of us aspire to be improvisational comedians. But surely we can learn from the discipline of this strange and surprising craft.

If comedians can practise being positive, open, flexible, humble, and intensely focused on listening, why can't we practise this approach in our spiritual lives? It helps to remember that we have already been given everything we need to accomplish this as we travel the path to God. Maharaj Charan Singh explains in *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. II: "Does the Lord not know what you need? He who can fulfil all your needs can also decide what it is you need. Surrender yourself to him. Hand yourself over to him. And whatever he sees fit, he will give to you."

Knowing that we have already been equipped with everything we need makes it much easier to say *yes*. Whatever is the script of our lives, it is sufficient. And we have been given the most important role a soul can have: to forget our small, petty selves and to listen with all the focus we can muster to the Divine music that calls us home.



Resisting Tyranny

We all share one enormous common tyrant – the mind. For countless lifetimes we have allowed the mind to drag us mercilessly through the creation while holding us hostage here through repeated incarnations in the cycle of eighty-four. When we encounter a true living Master and receive the gift of initiation, we have received a sure sign that the Lord wants to free us from the mind's tyranny once and for all. But we have a part to play in securing this freedom. We are called upon to follow the vows we take at the time of initiation, and, most important, to attend to our meditation regularly and punctually every day. It is the power of this daily meditation that will bring us freedom from the mind's tyranny.

Maharaj Charan Singh explains our status in this creation as long as the mind is in charge.

This mind of ours, which is absorbed in deep slumber, has to be awakened; the only obstacle that hinders the soul from merging in the Lord is our mind. The soul is of the essence of the Lord. It is a ray of that divine sun, a spark from the Supreme Being, a drop of the divine ocean.... It has taken to the company of the mind. The mind itself is in the hands of the senses and is being constantly dragged by them in different directions. The result is that the soul, which is intrinsically pure and sublime, gathers coats of dirt and rust, which cover its refulgence.

Spiritual Discourses, Vol. I

Ironically, our tyrant mind is not happy in this creation. On its own, the mind will continue along the path of least resistance and follow the habits that have been deeply ingrained for lifetimes. This tendency of the mind makes meditation difficult for most of us, because the mind habitually runs out unchecked.

Eventually, we realize that this tyrannical mind cannot be controlled by our efforts alone. In the case of worldly tyranny, we may be able to escape its clutches by running away from the source of our distress. Perhaps we can find a different job, home, school, if they are the problem. However, attempting to control the mind is a much different challenge. As long as we remain at the mercy of the mind, we are

trapped in this world. We attempt to control this tyrant in a variety of ways. In *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. I, Hazur states:

We go to forests and deserts, temples and mosques, chapels, and churches. We make pilgrimages and take holy baths. We turn to recitals and charities; to scriptures and sacred books; to penances and austerities; ... None of these, however, is of any avail, for the mind does not cease its wanderings.... Unless the mind becomes attached to something vastly more enchanting than anything this world has to offer, it can never be successfully weaned away from whatever worldly pleasures it happens to be enjoying.

Maharaj Charan Singh continues:

Except for devotion to Nam, no second method exists whereby to awaken the mind. The result of practicing Nam is that as the attention is held steady at the eye focus, it begins to contact the heavenly music. Gradually ... the mind awakens to the Lord.... The soul is released from its clutches, and ... it realizes its divine origin.

Only Nam can free us from the mind's tyrannical attachments to the creation. "The Stubborn Pig," a story from *Tales of the Mystic East*, illustrates this point:

According to the story, Udho, the devoted disciple of Lord Krishna, once asked his Guru, "Sir, you are all-powerful and can do anything you wish. As I look about me, I see in this world that all living beings are suffering pain and misery of every possible kind. Many are sunk in despair. Why can you not be merciful and take all the suffering creatures to your heavenly abode, where there is everlasting bliss?"

Lord Krishna smiled and said, "Udho, my faithful friend, they do not wish to go."

"How can that be possible?" Udho asked. "It is hard for me to believe. How can I possibly believe that you are right?"

"Why not go and ask the creatures themselves?" Lord Krishna suggested.

Thinking that this would be the only way to discover the truth, Udho set out to ask his question of any creature that crossed his way. As it happened, the first living creature he came across was a pig.

“Pig, my friend,” he said, “there is a beautiful heavenly world beyond this earth where there is always peace and happiness. If you will come with me, I will take you there. We can start right now if you wish.”

“Will I have babies in your world?” asked the pig.

“No,” said Udho.

“Well, will I get the delicious refuse and swill in heaven that I get to eat here?” asked the pig.

“No,” said Udho. “But there is other food in heaven that I believe you would like very much.”

“I rather doubt it,” said the pig. “For what food could taste better than the garbage I eat here? So run along with you; I don’t want to go to that heaven you are talking about at all.”

Detachment can only come as a result of attachment to Nam. Attachment to Nam allows us to cultivate love for the Lord through our meditation. Love is a gift from the Lord and not something we can generate within ourselves by effort alone. However, when the Lord sees that we are sincere in our spiritual practice, his heart is moved to compassion. When he sees fit, he will bestow this gift of love upon us, and our meditation will become a joy rather than a struggle. Then, at long last, the tyranny will be over.



The Importance of Clear Thinking

Sardar Bahadur Maharaj Jagat Singh makes a powerful statement on the importance of clear thinking when he says in *The Science of the Soul*:

Satsangis should form the habit of 'thinking' – clear thinking. Very few people 'think.' Why do we lose our temper? Because we do not reflect. Why do people fall prey to the attack of lust? Because they do not think. Why does a mother weep at the death of her son? Why do people commit suicide at the loss of property or wealth? Because they do not think. 'Vichar' (clear thinking) is ninety percent 'abhyas.' Clear thinking is a blessing. It can easily be attained by a little practice. Most of our actions are done on the spur of the moment, without thinking. Always reflect calmly.

To create a good habit one must first recognize the bad habit we want to replace. In our case, clear thinking must replace confused thinking, muddled thinking, reactionary thinking, and just plain lack of thinking.

Although Maharaj Jagat Singh tells us that “very few people think,” we obviously think all the time; we just don't think clearly. We're not aware of our thoughts; we don't observe our minds when we think – we just let the mind do its thing unmonitored. Surely our minds are very active throughout the day, but very rarely do we take the time and make the effort to stop the automatic nature of the mind, or take a deep breath and simply observe exactly what our mind is doing at any particular moment. This takes intentional effort because we have let our mind roam unchecked for our entire lives – actually, for many lifetimes.

We are very fortunate that we, as satsangis, are forced to come face to face with the power of our mind every day in meditation. Most go through life completely unaware of the destructive power of an uncontrolled mind. Few people know how difficult it is to still the mind and concentrate it.

So, what is it that clouds our thinking? What prevents us from thinking clearly? Maharaj Jagat Singh gives us some examples of unclear thinking. He asks, “Why do we lose our temper?” Good question! He answers for us: “Because we do not reflect.” We become angry when things don't happen the way we want them to; when people say or do things against

our wishes. We react rather than pause, breathe, become present and then reflect with a balanced, clear mind.

We might go through life assuming that we *have* to lose our temper – it's "natural." But Sardar Bahadur questions that assumption. He tells us that, in fact, we don't have to go through life angry, that anger is a product of an unclear, reactive mind. We can actually disconnect the mind's autopilot and take control of our mind.

He then asks us, "Why do people fall prey to the attack of lust?" We may allow ourselves to fantasize about an attractive person we've just passed on the street. Or we keep eating even though our stomach tells us it's full. We don't think first; we just give our minds free rein and then act – unthinkingly. The lower mind falls prey to five reactionary tendencies – lust, anger, attachment, greed and pride. Left unchecked, without self-reflection, the mind naturally reacts negatively. But we actually have the ability to think before reacting

Maharaj Jagat Singh then asks a very bold question: "Why does a mother weep at the death of her child?" Can there be a more wrenching loss, a more painful life experience than the death of one's child? Certainly, it is natural to feel sorrow at such a time. But Sardar Bahadur shows us the power of clear thinking. Life can be extremely cruel. Very bad things can happen to us every day. Things that are completely out of our control can simply lay us flat. But Sardar Bahadur tells us that we have the power, the ability to withstand any blow – even the death of a child, even a cancer diagnosis, even financial ruin, even public disgrace. He makes a bold point: that the misery we experience in this world is just a reactionary state of mind. And that the reason we experience mental pain is that we do not think clearly.

He then reveals how we can achieve the ability to think clearly – through spiritual practice. As a result of our meditation, we can become aware of both our mind and our true self. We seek to merge our consciousness with the inner form of God, the Shabd, by bringing our attention to the eye centre, stilling the mind and becoming receptive to the sound and light of Shabd. We are training the mind to slow down. In meditation, we take the mind off autopilot and begin taking control of our consciousness. This, like any skill, takes practice. Clear thinking requires a controlled mind. For ages

our mind has run amok. For ages our thinking has been unclear, confused, controlled by the five perversions. Now, in this life, as satsangis, we are fortunate to finally start the process of regaining control of our own mind by thinking clearly.

We can't think clearly by sheer force of will. Our mind must be transformed. Our current mind is cluttered, unclear and weighed down by years – lifetimes – of neglect. On autopilot, our mind has automatically been pulled down and out into the world by strong attachments. Our thinking has been overwhelmed by our lower mind, and has been helplessly indulging in the five perversions – lust, anger, greed, attachment and pride. Only through meditation can we transform our lower mind to a higher one – a sublime mind, a pure mind. And only with the higher mind can we think clearly, free of the influence of the five perversions.

With clear thinking, we see the world for what it is – an illusion – a place that, by its very nature, is continually subject to change and decay. With clear thinking, and the Lord's grace, we can view the world as if we are merely watching a play, happy and unmoved by the drama, knowing that the players are merely actors playing a part written by the Great Playwright. And we learn to go through life with a light, happy heart, seeking our true home, the Lord. With this attitude we can appreciate the creation just the way it is, accepting our destiny and interacting with our fellow actors without judgment, but with love, compassion and understanding. This approach is reflected in the following words of the American spiritual philosopher Ram Dass:

When you go out into the woods, and you look at trees, you see all these different trees ... and some of them are bent, and some of them are straight, and some of them are evergreens, and some of them are – whatever. And you look at the tree, and you allow it.... You see why it is the way it is, you sort of understand that it didn't get enough light, and so it turned that way, and you don't get all emotional about it, you just allow it. You appreciate the tree.

The minute you get near humans, you lose all that, and you're constantly saying, 'You're too this,' or 'I'm too this.' Or that judging mind

comes in. And so I practice turning people into trees, which means appreciating them just the way they are.

Through meditation and a little practice, we can develop the habit of clear thinking and reflect calmly rather than react helplessly to the ups and downs that will always be part of the play of life in this world. We can just allow people and life to be the way they are, as we go through the drama of our life and our journey home.



The Ultimate Quest

*I am tired, O friend.
I am tired of going round and round
(the cycle of birth and rebirth),
Tired of people's exaltations, secular or sacred,
Tired of singing and dancing,
Tired also of service and worship.
The body is fatigued by lust and anger –
What more can I say?*

Guru Ravidas: The Philosopher's Stone

When feelings of utter despair stir within us, we may not recognize this as a blessing in disguise, yet it is. Experiencing this restlessness, loneliness, helplessness, and confusion leads us to question our very existence. The idea that there must be more meaning in our life starts to play havoc with our minds. What is our purpose here? Is this all there is? What happens after death? So many questions, but no answers will ever be forthcoming from the outside world.

About loneliness, for example, Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

The feeling of loneliness that you experience is, in fact, a blessing in disguise.... This feeling of loneliness will vanish only when our soul returns to its source, the Lord himself.... This feeling is the outcome of the thirst of the soul for its Lord and should be welcomed. If correctly employed, it will lead our footsteps to the palace of the Lord.

Quest for Light

It is because of this turmoil looming inside us that we embark on an inner search. This search is a giant step in our quest for spirituality. After eons and eons of riding the merry-go-round of transmigration, we are gearing up to disembark on our return home. This return is the moment the soul has been crying out for since we left our real home.

One who sincerely searches for life's meaning is yearning to know God. Fortunate are those who find themselves in this state, for it means they want to meet the Lord. But how do we accomplish this? Is it even possible on this plane of life, here and now, to know God?

Guru Ravidas outlines the dilemma we find ourselves in:

*Restless is my mind, O Lord –
How should I practise devotion to you?
If you could see me and I could see you,
We would be in reciprocal love.
You, of course, see me, but I don't see you;
This thought has made me utterly bewildered.
You dwell all the time within all;
It is I who know not how to see.*

Guru Ravidas: The Philosopher's Stone

Our search for God begins when he instills in us the desire to experience his presence. Unbeknown to us, our soul was marked before our birth, making it possible for a living, true, spiritual adept to put us on the path toward God-realization.

Soami Ji in *Sar Bachan Poetry* explains this loving embrace bestowed on us, “He has taken me into his arms and granted me the gift of steadfast devotion.” The truth of the matter is that we can never find God through our own efforts, no matter how hard we try. In *Kabir, the Great Mystic*, we read, “No one can recognize a true Master except by his grace, and arriving at his feet is a very, very rare gift of the Lord.” But rest assured, a true living Master will direct us to himself and reveal his true form to us.

Before returning to our source, we must pay off our karmic debts, from this and past lives. By going through our destiny, meditating daily, and through the grace of the Lord, we will reach our goal of self-realization and God-realization. Will this happen immediately after initiation? Not likely, as we each carry a mountain of karmas.

Regardless of what we perceive as results, our meditation brings us closer to our goal. Meditation is what our beloved Master asks us to do. Meditation is the answer to all our questions. Meditation lightens our karmic load and enables us to tread the internal path with the Master's guidance.

Simran, repetition of the five holy names given to us at the time of initiation, and bhajan, listening to the sound current or voice of God, are powerful forces. When our mind is not occupied, we should avail

ourselves of these precious gifts as much as possible during the day. They aid us in keeping our thoughts pure and our actions noble. Then at the time of our formal meditation, we will be more settled and at peace.

Despite all we have to account for, our Master comforts us and warms our hearts when he assures us that he will take care of everything if we do our meditation as best we can with love and devotion. By doing our meditation, adhering to our vows, being a good human being, and being blessed with our Master's grace and benevolence, we will reach our goal of uniting with God and returning to our true home, where he is waiting for us with open arms.



Throw Your Clock Out the Window

*If you are alone with your Beloved,
throw your clock out the window.
Were you planning to use numbers
to count the tears of too much tenderness,
too much joy?*

*Don't let a mechanical device tell you it's time
to stop pouring your love back into God,
time to stop the bliss of giving yourself away,
and tumble headlong back into the world.*

*Look.
Your Beloved left the door ajar for you ...
Cross over his threshold. Step out of time.
And close the door behind you.*

The world won't notice if you show up late.



The Other Side of Surrender

In today's world, when we think about surrendering, we automatically assume the worst – that someone may be giving up or capitulating, as may be the case with countries at war or a patient fighting a deadly cancer. The underlying assumption about surrendering in a worldly sense is that one may be falling prey to another's power, influence, or authority. For us, as seekers or disciples of this path, it is important to consider the other side of surrender – the spiritual side. This side of surrender brings forward the concept that surrendering fosters spiritual growth, transformation and, ultimately, salvation from the cycle of birth and death.

In *The Path of the Masters*, Dr. Julian Johnson discusses the concept of surrender in a worldly light when he says:

I am sure many of our critics will say: Why surrender your individual will or personality to a Master? Isn't that going back into voluntary slavery? Isn't that another way of crushing individual initiative and strength of character?

While an outsider may feel this way, once a seeker or a disciple comes to the path, they begin to understand what submitting to the Lord's will actually means. We can choose to view the act of surrendering as weakness, or we can look at it as a source of spiritual strength, a way to live in the Lord's will by accepting whatever comes our way.

When we view surrender as a source of strength, we place our faith in the path and the Master. Dr. Johnson explains that the reason we surrender to the Master's will is that "complete surrender to the Master is the only avenue or path to complete liberation." But then the question arises: how is a soul freed if, by submitting, we are placed at the mercy of the Lord's will? Dr. Johnson's statement might sound paradoxical to the layman, but to a disciple, it makes sense – if we understand what complete surrender to the Master entails. Dr. Johnson explains:

First, let us say that the word surrender is not a suitable term for what is meant in this connection, but it is about the best term we have. It would be better to say that one fully trusts the Master.

Surrender for us is having the true faith that anchors us to the Master and this path. It is equivalent to saying that we trust that our best interests are in the hands of an expert, our Guru.

As an example, let's say a sick man visits a skilled surgeon for a consult on an operation he's advised to have. He's thought over the matter, talked it out with his family, and scoured the Internet for reviews on this surgeon's competency. Surrender, in this case, means the man is placing his trust in the surgeon to do the surgery to the best of his ability, and expecting to recover to as normal a life as possible. However, if the sick man refuses the surgeon's expertise, stating that he will be his own doctor or surgeon, he is exerting his ego and not surrendering. He is not trusting or having faith in the doctor's abilities and training, and thus will lose any benefit from the surgeon's healing skills.

Similarly, Master is our expert spiritual doctor; if we don't have full faith in him and give him our time and effort in meditation, how can he possibly extricate us from this world and take us home?

Complete surrender means that out of love and faith we, as disciples, gladly follow the Master's instructions, humbly trusting that he will lead us to the Lord's abode. Love drives us to sit, concentrate, and practise our meditation as our karmas play out in our lives. As Dr. Johnson explains:

By perfect surrender to a Master... one gains everything, ending in the most perfect liberty. This is well expressed by one great Sufi, who said: "Give us all you have, and we will give you all we possess." By surrendering all to the Master, we gain everything.

If we give our Master our time and effort in simran and bhajan, he will carry us upwards to union with the Lord. In this way, the worldly connotations of the word "surrender" do not apply to us; we are free to focus on the other side of surrender, the spiritual side. The spiritual side of surrender shows us that no matter how caught up in the world we are, there is always a power greater than us pulling the strings. If we can follow our vows and sit in meditation, we can easily surrender to the Lord's will, knowing full well that he is our expert guide watching over us on our journey home.



Formula for Success

How can we win this battle with the mind? When we look at the way the most successful people in the world operate, often, the principles they use resemble what the Masters tell us to do. The only difference is that successful people use them for worldly gain, while the Masters want us to use them for spiritual benefit. Let's review a simple three-step process used for success in the world.

First, focus on right now. As human beings, we tend to think deeply about the past and the future. But being stuck thinking about the past or overly concerned about the future tends to paralyze any progress we might make today. Focusing on the present also is similar to the Master's advice. Our intelligence, our thinking mind, can help or hinder us. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh tells us:

Intellect will not take you to the destination, but it can become a hindrance in your way to following the path. Ultimately, faith and practice – not intellect – will take you to your destination. But intellect can become our friend if we satisfy it.... And once the intellect is satisfied, that intellect will be our best friend, our best guide. Then nobody can shake us.

We can't do anything about yesterday, and we aren't guaranteed tomorrow. Focus on today because that's all we've got. The Masters even go one step further. They tell us to focus on this moment, right now. If we close our eyes, we are "inside." It is natural. All we have to do is keep our attention in the darkness and do simran, repeating the five holy names given to us at initiation. Being behind the eyes is not a place in the future or the past. It is being present in this very moment.

The second step for success is to eliminate the clutter in our lives. We all have thoughts that come and go that aren't necessarily related to the task at hand. This mental clutter can cause an internal train wreck in our minds and often derails our best intentions. Get rid of the clutter. Block it out, no matter what you have to do. Ask yourself, "Are these thoughts relevant to what I have to do right now?" If the answer is no, chase them out of your head with simran. Far too often, we are consumed with

irrelevant thoughts. The Masters often tell us to live a simple life, giving our attention only to important things.

For spirituality, we need to be focused. Our life and thoughts should revolve around the Master and our meditation. Whatever we do in our daily activities should be arranged so that it helps us at the time of meditation. We should consciously prepare for meditation by not letting our thoughts and actions go so astray that we become lost in the senses and worldly pursuits. That, in turn, makes it difficult for us to concentrate and attend to meditation.

We have to make conscious efforts to improve our meditation. We have to take practical steps to be attentive at the time we sit. Then we will be prepared and ready to receive the gifts he wishes to shower on us. All of us say out loud that we want to be with the Lord, that we never want to be separated from him. But how many of us live our life that way?

Many of our thoughts are for worldly gain, fame, and rewards, and are not aligned with our spiritual goal. Rather than be ashamed or feel bad about these tendencies, we can use this awareness to gradually reshape and realign our thoughts and actions in ways that can help us move forward.

Otherwise, we will continue to waste our time on unworthy things or endeavors. The Masters don't tell us not to do worldly things. Rather, they tell us not to give worldly things so much importance that we will be distracted from our spiritual pursuits.

Third in the formula for success is not to be attached to outcomes. Attachment to outcomes is among the common themes we hear when initiates complain about not making any progress. The Masters often tell us that we actually are making progress, but often we're not aware of it. The Masters also tell us that progress is not in our hands, and that the only thing we can do is sit in meditation and do our simran, looking into the darkness and listening to whatever sounds we may hear. Yet still, we should sit and listen while looking into the darkness. We should never be disheartened by a seeming lack of results, as the Master assures us there are no failures in Sant Mat. In any case, what counts in meditation is love, not progress. Hazur says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

You see, we should not do our meditation on a calculated basis. We are so fond of getting wages for anything we do. We say, I have done simran for so long, what advantage will I get? Love never demands any wages. Love itself is an effect of wages. The Lord has given you that love to love him. What more wages could one demand from the Lord? A lover doesn't demand any wages at all. He just wants to love. But we hardly sit in meditation and our sole aim is: How much have I been able to gain, how many karmas have I been able to wash today? You wash nothing; if that is the calculation, you wash nothing. When that love comes, you don't want any reward for your wages.

Hazur continues:

You see, you don't have to ask the Father at all. You have only to love him.... If you become a loving son, he'll give you more than you need.

We have a choice to make. We can spend our time chasing worldly goals that will vanish and give us no lasting pleasure, or we can seek immeasurable peace and bliss. We can strive to live up to the vows we took at initiation and lean in to experience the joy and happiness that the Master offers us.

Many forces pull us away from the Lord. To overcome those forces, we have to put our entire focus on turning inward. We need to do that now and take advantage of the present moment. Ultimately, only one thing pulls us back to the Lord: love, the most powerful force in the universe. Don't wait – seize the moment.



Unshakable Faith

Faith is the driver behind all our efforts. We get out of bed in the morning because we have confidence that we will be able to perform our duties for the day and take care of ourselves and our families. Faith is a force that keeps us going. When we enter school, we have faith that we will be able to master the material and eventually acquire a profession. When we are sick and go to a doctor, we have faith that the doctor will know how to help us. When we were little, we had faith that our parents knew how to take good care of us. When we came on the spiritual path, we had faith that by following the Master's guidance, we will reach our destination.

However, before following any spiritual path, we are encouraged to read and study and ask questions. This process is necessary so that we understand within ourselves that this is the path we wish to follow. The more questions we resolve before initiation, the more prepared we are to turn our focus to the practice of meditation. First, we build an intellectual faith, and then through meditation, our faith becomes unshakable.

Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

Without faith, we don't make any progress at all. But first we have to build intellectual faith in the philosophy. And in the light of the philosophy, we have to weigh the Master. And then real faith will come only when you practice.

Intellectual faith may lead us to ask for initiation from the Master. This preliminary faith helps us when we embark on the spiritual path. Indeed, it is needed for us to apply ourselves to any task. We study hard for our exams because we believe that our efforts will enable us to pass. We follow our doctor's instructions because we believe we will get well if we do. We follow our parents' guidance closely because we have faith that we will benefit from their knowledge. This faith is also what we need to begin a spiritual practice.

In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Hazur says:

You have to have preliminary faith in order to practice. In order to do research in the laboratory, preliminary faith is required. Otherwise, you will

refuse to do research. But actual faith comes only when you are able to get satisfaction from that research. Then your faith comes, not before that. On the outside, we feel that we have a lot of faith. This is just a self-deception, I would say. We have no faith at all. Christ said that if you have even as much faith as a grain of mustard seed, you can move mountains. That faith we develop only from within, by practice, by testing within. Not outside.

It is our practice of meditation, our own inner experience, that builds faith. He emphasizes:

Actual faith comes by experience, and faith comes from within, it doesn't come from outside at all. The faith that we build by seeing other people doesn't have much depth at all; it's very shaky. The faith that comes from within by meditation – which strengthens our faith, rather it creates faith – that is unshakable faith. Faith is very essential before we can put forth an earnest effort to practice.

So, Master is telling us that faith must be developed from our research and practice, from within. Faith, like meditation, is an inward journey. It cannot be built on what others do or say. Through our meditation, faith grows, and our love and devotion for the Creator blossoms.

As we continue on the path, sitting in meditation every day as instructed, the Masters advise us not to have any expectations about results. We must recognize that everything is in the hands of the Lord, not ours. Sometimes, over years of effort, we may feel we have no visible signs of progress in our meditation, and our faith may become shaky. Why are we not making inner progress? When will my meditation bear fruit? Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, there are many aspects of worldly life that have no exact timetable for visible results. Who can guarantee how long it will take us to find a career or advance in that career? Can we guarantee when or whether we will be married? Do we have a guarantee that any children we might have will meet our expectations? So much of life is totally outside of our control. Why should spirituality be different?

If we devote ourselves to meditation, we will eventually have no questions. And we will simply lose interest in any questions we may have had. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Hazur is asked, “Can the intellect ever really be satisfied except by the touch of the Master’s love?” He replies:

Intellect definitely gets satisfied. And definitely its satisfaction gives you certain faith, and definitely that faith leads you to practice.... When the time comes, all the questions which have looked to you like the Himalayas, they will become meaningless to you. You won't bother or care about them.

As with all our questions about anything on the path, everything starts and ends with meditation. Knowing that our progress in meditation is in the Master's hands, we might look at our actions and see if we put what we genuinely believe into practice. If we say we believe in Sant Mat, but don't put effort into meditation, how can we deepen our faith? Effort in meditation is what will create an unshakable foundation of faith so that we can proceed on our journey.

The whole purpose of our existence is to turn toward the Creator within and build our love and devotion. That is why we have embarked on this spiritual journey. We know where we stand today, and we also have a sense of where we want to reach eventually. The only thing we can do now to progress spiritually and to grow in faith is to devote ourselves to meditation. We must act on the instructions of our guide. Meditation is our action. Meditation is our effort. Once we devote ourselves to meditation to the best of our ability, we can be carefree and rely on the Lord's grace and mercy, which is always abundant.

In *Honest Living*, we read that:

Ultimately it is grace and mercy – the mystery of love, the Shabd – that brings a person to the spiritual path. It is our responsibility, however, to contribute whatever we can to make the journey easier. The Lord's grace is abundant, and when he wills, he will wipe clean our debts. But our contribution to this great journey, however small, is highly significant, for it is our effort to move towards him that brings his grace.

Our part in all of this is small, indeed, yet essential. We know our limitations, but he sees our potential. By steadfastly applying ourselves to our meditation practice, we enable our faith to grow until it becomes unshakable.



Know Reality

Humanity, for aeons, has attempted to understand and describe the nature of reality. To some extent, no single perspective is sufficient, for our reasoning and intellect are limited when trying to discover whether or not a higher reality exists. While reasoning and intellect are useful for making sense of this physical world, saints and mystics encourage us to seek a higher reality beyond this physical realm – something which cannot be attained by the intellect.

And what is that something? Some call it God, some call it Truth, some call it Reality. Those who have experienced it say that it can be experienced only through direct perception by the soul. Maharaj Charan Singh was asked if he could give us a concept or description of the Lord and he replied:

You see, he is a power. Give him any name. We cannot even say he is a power. We cannot say he is a person. It is difficult to describe him. I think it is for us to know him rather than to describe him. We all try to think with our own limited intellect what he would be like. What are we? Have we ever thought about ourselves? This body, of course, is comprised of the five elements, but there is something in the body which keeps it going, and that is the soul.... When the soul leaves the body, all these five elements decompose or merge back into their own origin.... What is the concept of the soul? We have seen many people dying. Have we ever seen anything going out of a body at the time of death? We have no concept of the soul, and that means we have no concept of ourselves. Then how can we have a concept of the Lord?

The concept that we have of ourselves should be the same as our concept of the Lord.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

This concept is a great leap – from identifying with our mind and body to identifying with our soul. Hazur explains that we could say that the Lord is a power, but even that description is inadequate. How can we see power? We might see the effects of power, but we don't see power itself – to us, it's only a concept. Hazur says we need to experience power

to know power. Similarly, we need to experience our soul to know our soul and know the Lord. Hazur continues:

It cannot be explained logically that he is one. He exists. He is in every one of us and we are part and parcel of him. We have come from him and we are trying hard to go up and merge back into him. This is the natural inclination of our soul towards God. He has put that natural inclination within everyone. And that natural inclination is compelling us, working within us towards him. Without it, we would never even think about the Lord. He himself implants in us his devotion or his yearning or his longing for himself.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

So that longing or yearning to go back to and know the One, the Father, the Lord, is naturally within us, and if we experience that yearning, it is grace. However happy or distraught this yearning may make us, we are very fortunate to experience it, because we are experiencing an aspect of the soul.

How did it all begin? Hazur explains:

First, there was only the Lord, who is without beginning and without end. He has projected himself everywhere. There was nothing besides him. He was the only one. All that we see is just his own projection. Everything is projected from him. If we admit that there was something besides him, then the Lord is not one. He is the only one – he always was, is and will be. He is everywhere, and everything is his own projection.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

That is a bit mind-boggling. We can't visualize this projection. We can't comprehend it. But the Lord's projection emanates from the power that is Shabd – also known as the Holy Spirit, the Word, the Tao. Different cultures have different names for the same Reality. On the physical plane, this power, this projection comprises all that is, and it is most active in living beings. It gives us life. It is our soul, which animates the physical body. That soul is a part of the Lord, as is everything else because it is the Lord's projection. But the soul does not decay, while the physical creation does; the soul is reborn in another body unless it returns to the Lord,

the source of Reality. Without the power of that Reality – the Shabd – the creation itself would no longer exist. Hazur explains:

There is something that holds the whole universe together. When the Lord withdraws that power from the universe, this whole universe will dissolve ... and there will be nothing but the Lord. So there is something to hold this whole universe together.... We call it Shabd or Nam.... The Lord has created this universe with that Word, as you have read in the Bible.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

But where does that leave us? We're stuck in the middle of this projection somehow, somewhere. What if we feel that pull, that longing for something higher and better than what we experience here in this universe? The obstacle in pursuing this inner pull is that our mind has captured our soul. Hazur says:

Soul, in essence, is the same as Nam or the Lord. But in association with the mind it becomes extremely dirty, it gathers heavy coats of rust; it loses memory of its immanence; it begins to feel that it has no separate existence, that it is a part of the body and the mind.... When it is once again united with Nam, however, it comes into its own; it awakens from deep slumber; it recognizes its exalted origin; it realizes that it is different from the body and the mind. It then dawns on the soul that these two, the body and the mind, are mere accretions, mere garments, mere coverings to hide its purity, to mask its transparency, to provide vehicles for its functioning in the world. The uncovering of the soul is the discovering of God. So long as the soul is attached to the body, it can never escape from its captive condition.

Spiritual Discourse, Vol. I

Masters are sent to find those who are yearning for the Lord and willing to take the steps necessary to make the journey back to the Lord. We need to rise internally above this body and mind to higher levels of consciousness. And for this, we need a guide or teacher. Guides and Masters of the highest spiritual attainment teach and practise the Shabd, Nam, Sound Current, or Word of the Bible. Shabd is the core of the meditation they teach, and the central theme of their discourses.

So finding a guide, a true Master, is essential for finding God. If we stick to our own devices, we would never move beyond the mind and ego. We would be fooling ourselves. A Master is necessary to navigate the inner path, which can be more challenging to travel than the physical world..

The Masters see the entire play – backward and forward. They know it is just a play. They know that all we see is illusory. It has no real substance – because it is continually changing from one image to another, from one illusion to another. They know what is real. They have experienced it. Sent by the Lord, their mandate is to take us home. We have only to put into practice what they guide us to do.

The soul, this particle of Shabd, wants nothing more than to return to its source in the Lord. Let us work to control our mind and do our meditation so that the soul may achieve its goal. For then, when the soul returns to its goal, there will be no question of kindness and love, self-discipline, contentment, acceptance, and submission because there will be no ‘us’ anymore. We will know Reality and we will be one with it.



BOOK REVIEW

Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness

BY SHARON SALZBERG

PUBLISHER: BOULDER, COLORADO: SHAMBHALA PUBLICATIONS, 1995.

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This book focuses on the Buddhist teachings on four primary states of consciousness that can be cultivated and practised: lovingkindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and equanimity (*upekkha*). These are called the *brahma-viharas*, meaning “heavenly abodes.” The Buddha developed systematic meditation practices to foster the development of these states of mind. Practitioners are able to free themselves from the binding grip of selfishness, cruelty, resentment, and craving, and to experience the freedom of love, compassion, sympathetic joy, and equanimity. Salzberg explains:

Spiritual practice, by uprooting our personal mythologies of isolation, uncovers the radiant, joyful heart within each of us and manifests this radiance to the world. We find, beneath the wounding concepts of separation, a connection both to ourselves and to all beings. We find a source of great happiness that is beyond concepts and beyond convention.

This book explains each of the *brahma-viharas* and sets forth practical exercises that help to cultivate them. To develop lovingkindness, or *metta*, one of the first practices is to repeat a sequence of four phrases: “May you be free from danger,” “May you have mental happiness,” “May you have physical happiness,” and “May you have ease of well-being.” These phrases are first practised with respect to ourselves, then later towards someone we are grateful to, then to a friend, then to a neutral person, and finally, when we are mature in our practice, to those we consider enemies. In doing this we realize our common humanity in that we all wish to be happy, comfortable, and free of fear. We also come to see that our intentions and actions affect all of life.

Compassion, or *karuna*, arises out of seeing the true nature of the suffering in the world. As Salzberg says, “Compassion allows us to bear

witness to that suffering whether it is in ourselves or others, without fear.” Ultimately, we begin to live “with sympathy for all living beings without exception.” The meditation on compassion uses one of two phrases: “May you be free of your pain and sorrow” or “May you find peace.” As for lovingkindness, or *metta*, the practice follows a progression: first one directs these phrases toward a person who is experiencing physical or mental suffering, next to one’s self, then onward to a benefactor, friend, neutral person, difficult person, and in the end all beings.

What we are doing in the compassion meditation is purifying and transforming our relationship to suffering, whether it is our own or that of others. Being able to acknowledge suffering, open to it, and respond to it with a tenderness of heart allows us to join with all beings, and to realize we are never alone.

Sympathetic joy, or *mudita*, is the state of mind in which one is truly happy when others are happy. The Buddha called *mudita* “the mind-deliverance of happiness.” Salzberg says that this type of happiness liberates us “from the constricting effect of our negativity toward each other. We limit ourselves, and we limit others. We judge each other, compare ourselves to each other, demean and envy each other, and we suffer the strangling effects of these limitations.” Sympathetic joy is considered the most difficult of the *brahma-vihara* practices because so many mind states block our ability to develop it. The practice begins by focusing on someone it is easy to rejoice for and care about. The phrase repeated is something like “May your good fortune continue.”

The practice of equanimity, or *upekkha*, helps one develop a spacious and still mind that can be present with all the ups and downs of life. Salzberg says that the practice of equanimity is “learning deeply what it means to let go.” It is a state of non-reactivity that can lead to freedom in every moment. It is the final practice of the *brahma-viharas* because it “balances those heartfelt wishes with the recognition that things are the way they are. However much we may wish for something, most results are beyond our control.” The words recited in the equanimity meditation are: “All beings are owners of their karmas. Their happiness and unhappiness depend on their actions, not my wishes for them.” The words are first directed toward a neutral person – the easiest person for this practice. From there the sequence is: benefactor, friend, enemy, oneself, and all beings.

In the final chapter of the book, which discusses morality and karma, Salzberg points out that in the course of our many lives on this earth, we have all been and done everything. There is no point in judging anyone. The only thing that makes sense is compassion. She explains the importance of morality as both the “necessary foundation for liberation” and “one of the path’s great fruits and culminations.” It is important because we are all interconnected and what we do to others we also do to ourselves.

If we want to quiet our minds, to bring our lives into spiritual truth, to see into the life of things, we need to live in harmony. There is no way to disregard our behaviour and then sit down in a formal posture on a meditation cushion and experience freedom, because each part of our life is thoroughly intermeshed with every other part.

Striving for advanced meditational states without caring about how we relate to others day-to-day is meaningless. She likens it to someone getting in a rowboat: “They row and row and row with great earnestness and effort, but they neglect to untie the boat from the dock.”

The practice of the *brahma-viharas* is an essential part of “untying the boat.” This is because this practice develops a generous heart, a key factor in letting go.

The movement of the heart in generosity mirrors the movement of the heart in letting go on the inner journey. Letting go – abandoning, relinquishing – is actually the same mind state as generosity. So the practice of giving deeply influences the feeling tone of our meditation practice, and vice versa. In this way, generosity establishes the ground in which meditation practice can flourish.

Developing an inner attitude of generosity is essential, not only for learning to let go, but also for experiencing our connectedness with others. And it reminds us of our own innate goodness. “We all know what it feels like when we have done something we regret and feel we have to keep hidden.... We all know too, how it feels when we can stand by our actions with calm self-esteem.” Making right choices, grounded in an inner sense of generosity, gives us a great gift: a life of “dignity, integrity, wholeness, simplicity, lightness, clarity, gladness, peace, buoyancy.” Salzberg speaks of many ways to be generous and reminds us that generosity is a practice, because none of us does these things perfectly.

Her chapters on karma are clear and powerful. She explains that understanding karma enables us to take spiritual and moral responsibility for ourselves. “This is our only true property, the only thing we carry with us from life to life. The vibrational tone of any intention, the motivation behind our speech and action, reflects the kind of seed we are planting in any moment.” The attitude with which we respond – hopefully not just react – to each situation carries that “vibrational tone.”

Rather than feeling victimized by our circumstances and trying to escape them, we can work to change them by recognizing the cause of the painful condition, which is invariably hatred, clinging or ignorance. Salzberg gives us a sense of hope that the mind can be transformed, that living in balance can become more than a mere theoretical concept.

Through meditation and the brahma-viharas [the Buddha] offers us the possibility to radically change our relationship to life. When we learn to move beyond mistaken concepts and see clearly, we no longer solidify reality. We see waves coming and going, arising and passing. We see that life, composed of this mind and body, is in a state of continual, constant transformation and flux. There is always the possibility of radical change. Every moment – not just poetically or figuratively, but literally – every moment we are dying and being reborn, we and all of life.

