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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Take Hold of My Arm, My Master

Take hold of my arm, my Master,
or I will be swept away
by the swift currents of this ocean of existence.

How can I possibly get out of this net?

You are my only hope.

Now I have found a wonderful opportunity,
but I still face the dreadful vipers of Yama and Kal.

Come and teach me some mantra
and kindly take me up under your protection.

I am exhausted by my wanderings
in the wheel of reincarnation –
how can I return to my eternal home now?

In his mercy the Master then said:

Raise your consciousness to the sky within –
the path is treacherous.

Withdraw your mind and senses, put them to rest,
surrender your mind, body and worldly possessions –
only then will you find the eternal Shabd.

Love the Master with a steady mind,
rise to the higher regions within and sing his praises.

Take firm refuge in Radha Soami
for the rest of your life,
without slackening your resolve.

Sar Bachan Poetry





Our Number's Up

What is it about numbers and satsangis? Say the number two-and-a-half and you'll get an instant reaction. It'll range from a quick change of subject, to a look of guilt which says, "I know, I know, don't remind me," to a contented, "Yes, most definitely, every day without fail." You don't even have to add the word 'hours' to two-and-a-half. The significance of this number became etched on our minds from the moment we left our initiation session, full of optimism and anticipation of a life dedicated to meditation.

Sadly, for many of us, our initial optimism soon turned from confidence that we'd be approaching the gates of our eternal home within a matter of months, to a realization that we may well spend our entire lives trying to reach the eye centre. Every time we hear the words 'two-and-a-half', we are reminded of our misguided optimism about a quick journey home. We hadn't fully appreciated that it can be a struggle to set aside this amount of time on a daily basis, or acknowledged the challenge of concentrating for so long. Perhaps it wouldn't seem so bad if we said "a hundred and fifty minutes" – that doesn't sound quite so mind-numbingly long as two-and-a-half *hours*. However, whether it's a hundred and fifty minutes or two-and-half hours, whether we achieve perfect concentration or not, we need to build up to the allotted time as we promised.

Five – a multiplicity of connotations

The number five has many connotations for satsangis. We're reminded of how we can become enticed by the power of the five senses and fall prey to the temptation of the five passions. We're told about the five regions and the five sounds that will guide us on our inner journey to

our true home. We're also aware that, as human beings, there are five elements present within us, including the all-important ether. This gives us the power of discrimination that all other species lack, helping us to understand the difference between right and wrong.

Perhaps the most significant 'five', however, relates to the five holy names that comprise our simran. Given to us at the time of initiation, they're the most wonderful, priceless gift we will ever receive. They help us to remember our Master and form a binding association with him. Their constant repetition will help concentrate the mind and make it still – a prerequisite for our inner spiritual journey.

The potency of the five holy names lies in the fact that they came directly from our Master. If the five words were given to us by a fellow satsangi or if we had found them in a book, they would merely be a collection of sounds and letters. It's a bit like a bullet being fired from a gun – it's lethal! But the same bullet delivered by hand is harmless. So there is power in simran precisely because it is a gift from the Master. However, we can get even greater benefit from that power if we practise repeating the five names constantly, taking advantage of all the opportunities available to us throughout the day. When we're cooking, surfing the Internet, listening to music, or watching our children, by saying simran our mind can be occupied with remembrance of the Lord. This will help our meditation, making it easier to achieve the level of concentration that we aspire to.

The four promises

Four is another number that resonates with a satsangi. In the science of the soul teachings, 'four' is always associated with the absolute, no-compromise promises upon which we base our lives. We've probably lost count of the number of times we've heard explanations about the need for a lacto-vegetarian diet, abstinence from alcohol

and drugs, leading a moral life and commitment to meditation. We're definitely not following a 'sometimes vegetarian' lifestyle or being occasional social drinkers. We're absolutely committed. Period. We also need to ensure that we keep the third promise – honesty, kindness and high morality – with equal diligence and steadfastness as the first two. Together, they lay the foundations for our fourth promise – regular attention to meditation. Without following the first three absolutely, we have no chance of making progress with the fourth, our meditation.

The wheel of eighty-four

A satsangi immediately knows the relevance of eight-point-four, particularly when expressed as 84 lakhs. It brings home to us the complete insignificance of our position in the creation. Human beings may be at the top of this hierarchy, but we need reminding that we're just one of 8.4 million other species that also have a right to inhabit the planet. They're just as much a part of God's creation as we are. Eighty-four is also a salutary reminder that, without initiation from a true Master, there is no guarantee that we will be born again as a human and the soul can go up and down the hierarchy of species. We have experienced many lives in other forms and we now have an opportunity to ensure that we transcend the cycle of birth and death.

The unity of one

Once we've achieved our two-and-a-half hours through constant repetition of the five names and with absolute adherence to the four promises, then we will become aware of the significance of the best number of all. The number that means most to a satsangi is, of course, one. For we all aspire to experience that oneness and escape the duality of our lives. If only we could cease seeing the 'I', then we could merge into the one.

One-pointed concentration is our ultimate aim. And to complete our number journey, we can achieve that only by diverting our attention from the nine apertures and turning our attention to the tenth door or the seat of the third eye. This is where our inner journey begins. Here there is only room for one, and when the drop of our soul merges with the ocean of bliss, then our number really will be up.



Intense longing, ardent love and unflinching devotion denote the same thing. They are the three inseparables in Guru Mat – the path of the Masters, the essential ingredients of true bhakti. All the rest are innovations of the mind. The trinity of God, soul and Satguru is indeed one long chain of infinite love.... The individual soul is the drop, the Satguru the stream, and God the vast ocean.... Nothing save pure love pervades in Sach Khand, the abode of the ultimate reality.... It is truly the fountainhead of pure, unalloyed love, eternal and limitless. None but the saints have access to it and only the perfect adept abides there. Therefore, develop utmost devotion and abiding love for the Satguru....

It is through loving devotion to the Master that we get the secret of Nam. Even though in the beginning the intensity of love is not pronounced, with constant devotion and scrupulous adherence to the directions given by the Master, this deficiency is soon made up. In due course love wells up as an overflowing stream and liberates the soul forever from the ties of the world.

We are all recipients of immense grace. We are born as human beings, who alone have the capacity of God-realization. We have got a true Master who has granted us the boon of Nam and has come to reside permanently within the eye centre of each disciple. It is now clear that our duty is to live up to his injunctions, develop constant love and devotion, and thereby reap the reward of eternal bliss. 'In the union of the soul with Shabd is happiness; in the realization of God is bliss.'

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

The Heart of a Simple Prayer

Thou shalt make thy prayer unto Him, and He shall hear thee.

Bible, Job 22:27

A tale told by mystics of many cultures is about the disciple who, while praying to his Lord for the inner secret of prayer, received the call to seek out a shepherd living in the mountains many miles away. The disciple travelled long and climbed the mountains and when he had found the shepherd, told him that he had been sent to learn the inner secret of prayer.

“But I do not have such a secret, for I do not even know how to read,” the shepherd innocently replied.

Amazed, the disciple asked, “How do you pray, if you don’t know how to read the prayers?”

The shepherd hung his head and answered in a very soft voice:

“I recite the alphabet, for that is all I know. When I pray, I beg in my heart, over and over again, ‘Dear God, please take these letters and form them into prayers for me that will sparkle like gems and be fragrant with the sweetest of scents to reflect the love in my heart for you.’”

Upon hearing this, the disciple understood that the inner secret of prayer is that God recognizes only the simple prayer of a humble heart and not words covered with pride, offered by the learned.



Dare to See the Other Side of Death

In satsangs we often hear that few of us think about our own death, especially when we are young. As a young seeker, I would like to correct this observation because I do think about death a great deal! However, contemplating my own mortality was making me fearful and anxious. So, feeling fed up with my negative outlook, I decided to explore the matter in more detail, and I'd like to share my findings with you. I promise to try and make this article liberating and empowering and to reduce the fear associated with death as far as possible.

In general, when any mention is made of death, we do one of two things. Either we avoid the subject altogether and attach ourselves to transitory things. Or, if we do reflect upon death, we become fearful – I know I did. However, both responses show that we are turning a blind eye to the inevitable truth that one day, everyone, no matter if they are rich or poor, healthy or ill, young or old, has to die. The inevitability of this will not change, no matter how much we avoid the subject or worry about it. However, we can adopt a more positive outlook by understanding why we are so anxious:

Everybody has a terrible fear of the unknown. It is the lack of knowledge of the future and the past that causes this fear.... For an intelligent person there should be no fear of death. This fear exists only so long as the veil of ignorance darkens the inner knowledge.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Quest for Light*

The whole world has for ages shuddered at this ominous but inevitable fate which hangs over us all. They dread it because they do not understand it. It is like a child crying at the darkness. It is afraid because it cannot see what is there. People fear death because they do not know what it involves.

The Path of the Masters

We should obtain comfort from these quotes because they make it crystal clear that we are not alone in fearing death. It is natural to be scared, because death is something alien to us. From my perspective, it's a bit like life, when we often feel apprehensive in unfamiliar situations or when dealing with those with whom we have little experience. It is only when we have faced the situation, acquired experience, and gained deeper knowledge that the fear is eased. Similarly, until that personal inner knowledge and experience is gained, the fear of death is likely to remain buried within.

Let's turn to the reasons why we avoid thinking about death, beginning with a quotation from *Mysticism, The Spiritual Path*:

It is very astonishing indeed that we seldom think of death, although it may occur at any moment. For us there are always two possibilities – life or death. We are so much taken up with the thoughts of this life that we have no time to think of the other alternative – death. Our wisdom is confined to the concerns of this world, and we are extremely inconsistent, because we do not use our prudence for our spiritual welfare. In worldly affairs we are very wise. In earning our daily bread we try to be extra clever and make as much money as we can by working hard day and night, but we never realize that this body, for which we do so much, is after all to be taken away from us.

I love how bluntly truthful these observations are. We are so attached to the world that we are oblivious to the fact that one day we are not going to exist in the creation. For some strange reason, no matter how many times it's been explained to us that the material world is an illusion, we continue to associate ourselves with the mind and body, and view loved ones as belonging to us. It hardly ever crosses our mind that our body will perish and our family and friends will leave us one day. In fact, I wonder if the attention we give to worldly pursuits is a coping mechanism through which we try to deal with this harsh and horrible truth.

Is it possible to get past the grim associations that we have with death and, if so, how? Let's press on to find out:

In ... worldly matters we are wise enough never to undertake a journey without detailed planning.... But when it comes to the matter of death which is hovering over all of us, have we made preparations? Just as we arrange for food before we leave on a journey, have we made any arrangements for our final journey by spiritual practice?

Message Divine

What wonderful questions! They're so direct. How would we answer them? Clearly, there is an emphasis being placed on preparation, advice which is also given by Maharaj Sawan Singh:

Mark that we are here for a short time only, and in the end even our bodies will desert us.... At that time neither friends nor our worldly greatness will help us. Only 'the Word' and our Satguru

will relieve us. Therefore, even now begin to prepare for that event, lest you be found wanting in the time of trial.

The Dawn of Light

The Great Master is urging us to overturn our negative attitude by approaching death intelligently, without fear, and, most important, by preparing for its occurrence. But how can we prepare for death? What do we need to do? As Maharaj Charan Singh explains in *Die to Live*, we need to do our meditation because:

Meditation is nothing but a rehearsal during one's whole life for that end – death.... This whole Sant Mat way of life and attending to our meditation is nothing but a preparation for that particular time.... Meditation is nothing but dying daily ... when that particular time comes, those who have not died while living start crying and protesting and weeping, and say they don't want to die.... When the Lord gives the opportunity now to leave the body and to materialize the effect of meditation, then we should make use of it.

So meditation is a way of preparing for death and it will help us overcome our fears. It will also bring us closer to our Master. Building a relationship with him is very important because, in the end, only the Master is going to stay with us, and only he will be able to guide and protect us. Therefore, is it not logical that we make that relationship stronger than anything else? It's the only thing that is going to help us when all else fades away.

For those of us who are initiated, we have an opportunity to prepare for death by doing our meditation. For those of us who aren't, we can prepare ourselves by the way we think about death. In fact, whether

we are initiated or not, we would all benefit from training our mind to think more positively about our demise. This may be more easily said than done, but we need to try. Here are some quotes that could help:

It is time that men cease to think of death in such a gloomy mood. In fact, there is no death at all. There is simply a shifting of the scenes, and awakening in a new world. Death is a glaring deception.

The Path of the Masters

Death ... is only the name given to the phenomenon of the soul leaving the body.... It is merely the withdrawal of the soul from the gross senses, and its entrance into finer regions.... It does not mean annihilation. There is life after death, although we may not be able to see it.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol.1*

Many of us may find it difficult to think about death in the terms described above. Surely, though, as followers of Sant Mat, we should seek to understand this truth. It may be an uphill struggle to do so, but if we truly want to change our negative outlook on death, then we need to start preparing for it now. In the little time that has been allocated to us, let's be spiritually smart and use the gift of life wisely. Let's act now by doing our meditation and dare to see the other side of death.



If you do not recollect death, you will not practise Dharma seriously, nor will you be able to practise continually.... Our not recollecting death and impermanence is to blame.

As quoted in Buddhism: A Path to Nirvana

You're Really Not Going to Need Those ...

A small, fat white envelope of sturdy construction sat on the mat. Even before I saw the words 'identity and passport service' I knew what it was; and because being between passports always brings on a kind of low-level claustrophobia, I feel a sense of relief – freedom of movement has been returned to me!

Hastily I unwrap the little parcel to make sure it really is a new passport, and I'm filled with relief and gratification as I examine the stiff, shiny document. Briefly, I flick through the accompanying leaflets as I cross the room to bin them and, suddenly, stop – my hand hovering above the oblivion of the trash.

One of the leaflets is about organ donation, which makes me think of all those little films I've sat through at the beginning of many satsangs while thinking, "Yes, definitely should do that," but then just not got round to it because I can always do it *later*; I can do it *any time*.

It occurs to me that Baba Ji has suggested such a little, easy thing (yes, even easier than meditation is, in theory!) and yet I've just ignored that hint. No wonder meditation is so hard if I can't get round to doing even such a little thing as this. So: okay! I'll do it *now!*

Opening the leaflet, I see it's even easier than I had thought: all I have to do is text 'save' to a six-digit number on my phone. That's it! Okay, so they text me back a couple of times for my name, address, date of birth, and to ask whether I want to donate the whole caboodle or get picky about my inner noodles, but it's all over in a few minutes. And for anyone who's run out of free texts, there's a Web address where you can do the same thing just as easily online. Of course, the

exact process is likely to vary from country to country, but I expect that in most places it will be just as simple.

Forty minutes later, driving back from dropping the children off at school, I'm just about to pull out at a junction when I see a car closing in rapidly from the right and I take my foot back off the pedal. There was never really a chance of me not seeing the car, but it made me think: Wow! Imagine! How serendipitous would that have been? To have only just this morning signed up to the organ-donor register and then to make a sharp exit, young enough for my bits and pieces to be worth having. I could have saved somebody's life this very morning! I didn't, as it turned out, and that's just as well because several people here (not least my children) still rather need me in my currently assembled form.

It wasn't that I was likely not to see that car – it was just a point of reflection, mostly. The idea that something like that could happen and my essential organs go to waste – that I might not have got around to signing up for organ donation in time, that I might have missed the chance to save the lives of several other people.

Perhaps I'm the only one who's been slack in effort and devotion not to have got round to doing this organ-donation thing till now. After all, Baba Ji has been pointing out to us for years what a good idea it is. And of course you, or I, may live to 120 and end up so worn out that our presence on the register turns out to be a complete waste of bureaucratic time and effort (although I understand that even the organs of those in their seventies and eighties can be used to save lives). But still, I thought I'd mention it.



Feeling Funny

The Grim Reaper



Don't Shoot the Messenger

A satsangi sister was facing a turbulent time in her life, leaving her feeling quite despondent. An elder satsangi offered her advice, proposing a fresh perspective. We can all draw some inspiration from the encouragement he gave her when we, too, come across situations that we don't like or feel are negative in some way.

He reminded her that life can be seen as a play and that we should view our life as forming part of a divine design. Perhaps when something or someone upsets us, we should step back for a moment and be still. Instead of becoming 'up-set,' we should switch the syllables around and realize that it is all a 'set-up.'

If all life and all events are indeed a set-up, then maybe the person that was the cause of the upset is a messenger sent by the Lord. In *The Dawn of Light*, Maharaj Sawan Singh explains, "Whatever good or bad happens to you, through whatever person or object, directly proceeds from our loving Father. All persons and objects are but tools in his hand."

So, instead of 'shooting the messenger,' we should receive him or her gladly. Viewing the message as a gift, we should thank that person and bid him goodbye. Then we can turn our attention to the 'gift,' which not only helps clear our karmas, but may also contain a valuable lesson, such as detachment or obedience. For instance, Muso Kokushi, a Buddhist mystic, said:

When people are unsympathetic to you and the world does not go as you wish, this should be a help to detachment of feelings from the repetitious cycle of becoming and decay, gaining and losing.

As quoted in *Buddhism: A Path to Nirvana*

Besides clearing karmas, perhaps life's interactions and events also act as a mirror in which we can see ourselves. They help re-shape our thinking, help us choose the lens through which we view life.

We could therefore use our interaction with the messenger as a way of practising humility, or living in the will of the Lord. In *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh says, "However much someone maligns you, you should not be offended.... Acquiesce in the will of the Lord and be cheerful wherever he places you."

These are, however, fairly lofty ideals to live up to. More often than not, our initial reaction will be painful, giving rise to a cocktail of emotions such as anger, fear, grief, or disappointment. We need to stop for a minute, acknowledge them and then let them go. Think of all the energy that goes into these negative emotions. Wouldn't it be more productive to transform it into love and understanding? If we did, we would support our spiritual growth and become better human beings.

Yet in the midst of emotional turmoil, it is easier said than done to convert pain into love and compassion. Our ego is too strong for us to be able to ignore the experience of powerful emotions; that's why they can disturb us so deeply. To rise above them, we need the helping hand of the ultimate Messenger, our Master. More precisely, we must act upon his messages, the most fundamental being that we do our meditation.

There are many stories told about misfortunes experienced by saints. They were able to endure extreme difficulties because of the strength of their spiritual practice and the faith in God they had developed through it. We should learn from them and do our meditation diligently to help us mitigate the impact of our own misfortunes that, at this point, are deeply unsettling to us.

Meditation is a form of communicating with God in his language, a channel through which his love and grace flows. So, the more we do,

the more we will feel his love; our view of life will become brighter, more joyful and peaceful. Life will not then get many chances to upset us. Rather, we will be calmer, allowing the ups and downs to flow through us like water through reeds. The pendulum of our emotions will not sway furiously from side to side but remain balanced.

What would happen if we made an extra effort to do our meditation with love and devotion, stripping away all excess thoughts and focusing only on our Master? Let's try it, and find out for ourselves. Is it not time for us to stop shooting the messenger and get the message?



The surrounding situation may not be so friendly, it may even be hostile, but if your inner mental attitude is right, then the situation will not disturb your inner peace. On the other hand, if your attitude is not right, then even if you are surrounded by good friends and the best facilities, you cannot be happy. This is why mental attitude is more important than external conditions. Despite this, . . . many people are more concerned about their external conditions, and neglect the inner attitude of mind. I suggest that we should pay more attention to our inner qualities.

There are a number of qualities which are important for mental peace, but from the little experience I have, I believe that one of the most important factors is human compassion and affection: a sense of caring.

The Dalai Lama's Book of Love and Compassion

A Wake-Up Call

*Act fast, stop deluding yourself,
come and strengthen your love and faith.*

Sar Bachan Poetry

This wake-up call from Soami Ji Maharaj – in Bachan 18, Shabd 12 – goes straight for the jugular. He continues, “One thing I have learned about you, brother, is that you are remarkably dishonest with yourself.” These hard-hitting words leap off the page and grab one by the throat. The Master, whose love is constant although his words may be stern, is telling us what he really thinks about us, what he has learnt through his long association with us. And what is this one thing that has impressed him above all else? Is it our integrity? Is it our devotion? Perhaps it is our sincerity? No! It is the ‘remarkable dishonesty’ of our mind.

Elsewhere in the shabd, Soami Ji makes us even more ashamed of ourselves as he asks us, “How long will you keep on trying to impress the Master with your pretences?” A similar observation is made by Maharaj Jagat Singh in *The Science of the Soul*:

The Master knows that we are only feigning thirst and desire for Nam. Our prayers are not sincere and true.... Our mind is still steeped in cravings for the world and its objects. Remember that a Master cannot be deceived or cheated.

The nub of the problem, as Soami Ji writes, is that despite keeping the company of saints, we cling on to our old way of life. We don’t (as yet) reflect Sant Mat teachings in our every thought, action or

word, nor do we put *all* our effort into meditation. It is not that we are purposely trying to be deceitful, either to ourselves or the Master. Soami Ji and Maharaj Jagat Singh are possibly highlighting two of the most prominent stumbling blocks that many of us encounter at some point on our journey. We either become hijacked by work or relationships, or we become complacent in our efforts. In the former, we may find it difficult to devote our full time to meditation, as we use most of our energy in trying to please our loved ones or our managers. We may even rationalize this by telling ourselves that we are just doing what Baba Ji tells us, fulfilling our duties and responsibilities.

Complacency comes into our efforts to meditate when we delude ourselves that just getting up and sitting for meditation is enough. Again, we might take the Master's words out of context to convince ourselves that no further struggle with the mind is needed. We sit there half-heartedly as we tell ourselves, "The results are not in my hands; it's all his grace."

Recognizing the Master

In the shabd, Soami Ji reminds us that the Master "has assumed a human form to set you free, one way or another." He asks us, "Don't you realize who he is?" Clearly, we do not; otherwise we would not disobey him. But surely we don't do that, do we?

Because we don't directly oppose him, maybe we live under the illusion that we comply fully with his wishes. We embrace the Sant Mat teachings, yet there is some dissonance between what the Master asks us to do and what we do in practice. Every time Baba Ji gives satsang, he stresses the necessity of meditation over and above everything else, including physical darshan. So if we don't practise this, aren't we actually contradicting him? Through our actions – or more



Soami Ji Maharaj

accurately, inaction – we are, in effect, saying, “No, Master, you’re wrong. Meditation isn’t important.”

Soami Ji realizes there is a gap between our intellectual appreciation of the Master, and our experiential knowledge of him. So, in the first stanza he reminds us:

*Do not think of the Master as a human being –
he is the very life and spirit of Sat Purush, the true Lord...
Out of his mercy,
he speaks with you, advises you,
for in reality he is the perfect Being,
he is the Lord of Anami.*

Our perfect Master is the personification of Shabd and reality; he is of the Truth and reflects the Truth. Leaving behind the bliss of Anami Lok, the Master has come into the world for our good. He is showing us the way to escape the land of Kal, and to return to our true home, which is so indescribable that we are simply told that it is all love.

Intellectually, we realize the magnitude of what it means to have come into contact with the Master and to have formed a relationship with him. In moments of humility, as we reflect upon our weaknesses and shortcomings, we consider ourselves to be truly blessed and extremely lucky that the Master has come into our lives to impart the secrets of spirituality.

In fact, following the Sant Mat path brings a new meaning to the phrase ‘a once in a lifetime opportunity’ because this truly is an opportunity that comes once in hundreds and thousands of different lifetimes. Even the gods and goddesses on the higher planes are not as fortunate as we are. This is why, in the same shabd, Soami Ji pleads,

“Do not let this opportunity slip from your hands, as there will be no end to your roaming through the four forms of life.”

We should act upon the Sant Mat teachings now. Indeed, we often hear Baba Ji advise us to do our spiritual practice in this very lifetime. Are we somewhat reticent in our efforts because, at the back of our minds, we are using the concept of the four lifetimes as a back-up plan? Given how we feel about Baba Ji, why not honour and obey him by trying to achieve everything now, in this lifetime? We could be radical and forget the safety net of the four lifetimes and act as if there is only today – only now for us to reach our destination.

Giving up apathy

To act as if there is only today, we must, Soami Ji goes on to entreat us, “give up apathy”. Apathy means a lack of enthusiasm or energy. It is not that we have lost interest in Sant Mat or the Master – far from it, the more we travel on the path, the more it entwines us. We can no more leave this journey than we could do without the oxygen we breathe or the blood running through our veins. The apathy refers to our approach to meditation. Ironically, the more we can’t imagine our life without Sant Mat, the more complacent we become with our meditation. We either more or less neglect it completely, or it becomes routine, one of the many activities that we do each day, no more no less important than all the others.

Why are we doing this, especially when, intellectually, we are fully aware of the opportunity that has been presented to us? Maybe it’s due to the two most pernicious misconceptions of all: We can’t do meditation, and it’s boring!

Meditation is easy – all it involves is saying five holy names, one after the other. We don’t have to make it any more complicated than that. We can take it as a given that our mind will not be focused, that it

will jump around from one thing to another. For most of us, this will continue for a very, very long time, perhaps our entire lives. However, in a short space of time we can reach a point where we will be able to disregard the thoughts that pop up, whilst remaining fully aware of each round of simran. That is all that is asked of us and well within our capabilities.

There are days when the two and a half hours seem to drag on and we're even more eager for the alarm to go off than school children waiting for the home-time bell. However, even without reaching the eye centre, at some point we have all probably experienced some peace or enjoyment from our meditation. It may have lasted two seconds or the full two and a half hours – nonetheless, we have experienced it. We can use this as a foundation on which to increase the time in which we retain focus.

Let us end by taking heed of the advice given by Soami Ji. He says, “Act fast, stop deluding yourself”, serve, follow and devote yourself to the Master – which we all know means doing our meditation. Let us be confident in our abilities to do so and our determination to achieve the goals we have set for ourselves. If we do this, one day we will surely join the Master in Anami Lok.



Enough has been written and enough has been said. Now what is wanted is silence and work. Speaking distracts and scatters your attention. Silence collects thoughts. It draws your attention inward and strengthens the spirit. Now set yourself earnestly to practise. Practise makes a man perfect.

Be as perfect as your Creator.

Maharaj Jagat Singh, *The Science of the Soul*

The Rose Garden of Secrets

The Gift

The That Moon

*Whose face shone like the sun
Seeing I had cast all hope away
Filled a goblet of Divine Knowledge
And, passing to me, bade me drink
Saying, 'With this wine
Tasteless and odourless
Wash away the writing
On the tablet of thy being.'*

*Intoxicated from the pure draught
Which I had drained to the dregs
In the bared dust I fell.
Since then, I know not if I exist or not,
But I am not sober
Neither am I ill or drunken.
Sometimes like His eye, I am full of joy
Or like his curly beard, I am waving;
Sometimes, Alas! From habit of nature
I am lying on a dust heap.
Sometimes at a glance from Him,
I am back in the Rose Garden.*

M. Shabistari, *The Rose Garden of Secrets*,
translated by F. Lederer

Spirituality cannot be described in words. However, metaphors, symbols and visual images can reach or touch us in a way that day-to-day language can't. The poem on the opposite page was written as part of a spiritual thesis by a Persian Sufi, Shabistari, in the thirteenth century. As will be explained, Shabistari's poem uses particular Sufi metaphors, such as 'wine', the 'wine seller' and the 'rose garden' to convey the experience of discipleship, which is as relevant today as it was when it was first written.

Shabistari begins by referring to the beauty of the essential nature of the Master's moon-like being:

*The That Moon whose face
Shone like the sun*

He is "that" moon, the one and only, the incomparable one "whose face shone like the sun." In the first couplet, Shabistari describes how his Master affected his life, an experience many of us can relate to. When we first came to the path, the Master appeared in our lives like a shining light, lifting us from the gloominess of the world and dispersing the darkness of ignorance. We may recall that sense of discovery, of finding something that had been lost to us for aeons.

The first couplet also uncovers another truth. 'Thatness' can be seen as a reference to the Lord's eternal mercy, which he shows by sending his sons and daughters into the world to retrieve those souls who wish to return home. These perfect Masters come to connect our soul to the Lord through the sound current or Shabd. We come to understand that the Lord's mercy is not a one-off event, fixed with the arrival of a particular mystic, but constant, with Masters coming and going like waves surging back and forth through eternity.

The Master's face shines like the sun. He is both a particle of the Lord and the Lord himself – the source of life as is our sun in the sky. This is the God-man, the being who is both fully human and fully Lord – a tremendous paradox which we find impossible to grasp. However, as humans we have the opportunity to merge with the Lord, and it is in merging with him that our humanity is fully realized.

In the poem, the disciple has been earnestly seeking the Lord but, not finding him, has eventually “cast all hope away”. He has few options left. He might try to live by a stoical sense of duty; he might become clinically depressed; or he might live by the code ‘eat, drink and be merry’, burying the soul's stifled longings in activities which provide distraction. At this point, however, when the disciple was desperate in his search for the Lord, the Master entered his life and:

*Filled a goblet of Divine Knowledge
And, passing to me, bade me drink*

This image of a friend pouring a drink at a companionable table reminds us of the personal nature of the guru-disciple relationship. The Master is both universal and personal, so our experiences as initiates are both universal and personal.

The goblet that has been filled and passed to the disciple – and by extension to us – symbolizes the gift of Nam. This is the gift to which the writer refers in the title. Nam is our opportunity to begin the journey back to the Lord, and to do so we must contact the Shabd and “wash away the writing on the tablet of [our] being”. This is a very beautiful expression of the dynamic activity of the Shabd, which Shabistari refers to as wine. Our minds have been shaped by millions of experiences over countless lives. The faculty holding this bundle

together is the ego. If we are to become one with the Lord, the ego, the untrue bit of us, has to go.

Actually, the word 'ego' doesn't really do justice to the power of *ahankar*, this sense of I-ness and mine-ness. Rumi called the ego 'the commanding self', which describes the belief of the ego that it is the doer. Maharaj Charan Singh referred to the ego as "the veil of darkness" that stands between us and the Lord and which can only be removed when the mind attaches itself to the inner Shabd.

The next stanza describes the ecstasy experienced by the disciple as a result of drinking the nectar in the goblet:

*Intoxicated from the pure draught
Which I had drained to the dregs
In the bared dust I fell.
Since then, I know not if I exist or not,
But I am not sober
Neither am I ill or drunken.*

The disciple has performed his spiritual practice with such diligence that he is experiencing what Maharaj Charan Singh called the "unalloyed bliss" of the Shabd. The power of this is such that the disciple has lost all sense of his own identity; in effect, he is going through the process of self-annihilation. Despite his progress, the disciple has not reached the end point of his spiritual journey and, so is subject to swings of emotion and difficulties along the way:

*Sometimes, like His eye, I am full of joy
Or like His curly beard, I am waving;
Sometimes, Alas, From habit of nature
I am lying on a dust heap.*

The disciple's moods can be understood in terms of his relationship with his Master. Sometimes he is in a joyous state because even though he is physically and, as yet, spiritually separate from the Master, he takes joy in his yearning to be reunited. This state is, however, new to him, and he hasn't developed the capacity to sustain it. Hence, old habits take over, his attention becomes scattered and he experiences a different type of separation from that of yearning. Now he is feeling isolated from his Master, perhaps even detached. Yet he finds this very state of detachment unsettling. He knows that without the Master prominent in his life, he is reduced to "lying on a dust heap".

This is the universal experience of all disciples. Maharaj Charan Singh confirmed that we go through many phases in our meditation, including the vacuum periods when we feel dry and uninterested. The ups and downs will continue until we are fully merged with the Shabd through concentrated practice. This is why it is so important to make simran and meditation a habit so that eventually the habit will become stronger than the distractions and we will be able to sit regardless of how we are feeling. Maharaj Sawan Singh used to say, "If you can't bring your success to me, bring your failures."

As Maharaj Charan Singh explained in *Die to Live*:

Assure me that you have at least been giving your time to meditation. Whether you have achieved any results or not is a different question, but you bring me at least your failures, because that means you have been attempting to meditate, you have been doing your best.

Our precious time is something we can give to our Master. If he becomes, through meditation, the "still point of our turning world" then, as the poet writes:

*Sometimes at a glance from Him,
I am back in the Rose Garden.*

The glance could be outward, from the physical form of the Master, or it could come from within, stimulating a sense of renewed effort and zeal in our spiritual practice. Whichever form it takes, the effect is blissful. In the poem, a glance from his Master takes the disciple back to the Rose Garden. In Sufi literature, this symbolizes a perfect state of consciousness. The disciple has returned home. The poem began with reference to the separation between the disciple and the Master, conveyed in part by reference to the beauty of his physical form, “The That Moon”. It ends with their union in the Rose Garden.



It is impossible to praise the Supreme Lord adequately. The perfect Master is his manifestation and it is therefore also impossible to give him praise that is his due. He is like the Lord, beyond the reach of thought and imagination. Logic and reasoning are cripples. They are powerless to approach him. He cannot be seen, heard or described. Book after book can be written and the whole of one's life may be spent in writing, but still one would not be able to pen down even one letter relating to his personality.

*You are beyond inference, imagination,
probabilities or intellect.
You are beyond what I have seen, heard or read.
The book has finished and life has drawn to a close.
We are still only at the first letter.*

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

The Battle Has Just Begun

Our Father is love and we are small drops from that ocean of love.... He, out of his mercy, has bestowed upon you such a noble gift that all the treasures of this world stand in no comparison with it. But it will not improve your condition if you will not use it.

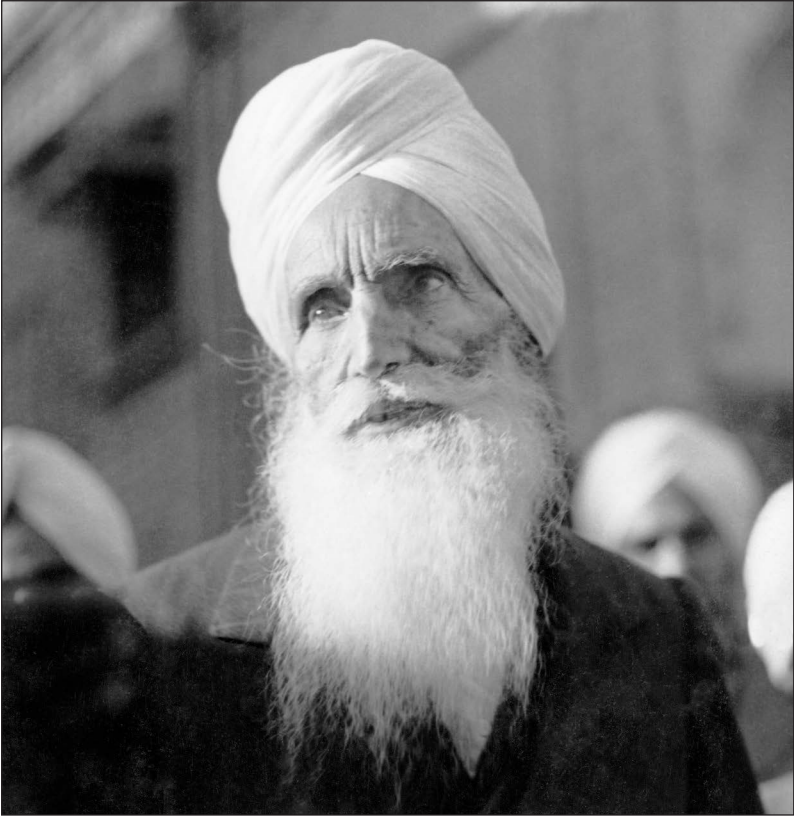
Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*

The first essential thing, therefore, is to enter this laboratory within ourselves, by bringing our scattered attention inside of the eye focus. This is a slow process. But we are not justified in saying that we cannot do it, or that it is impossible, or that it is useless. Here is a worthy pursuit for the application of our critical and other faculties. If we cannot control and subdue our thoughts, arising within us, who else will? It is our job and we must do it, and we must do it now, in this very lifetime, while we are men; for man is the highest form of creation.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Mind alone is our enemy.... Do not lose heart but fight courageously. The battle has just begun. Mind is not stronger than the sound current. The Master is with you. He is watching your every movement. He is prepared to fight your battles with you. Take him as your helper. Have faith in him. Fight the mind and you will succeed.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*



Never think for a moment that you are at such a long distance from me. The Master in his Shabd form is within you and watching you and looking after you in every way.... My connection with you is not limited to this life, but is for all times. All of us are to reach our own home, Sach Khand.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*



The Human Condition

A friend recently exclaimed, “The spiritual path you are following seems to cause you a lot of conflict,” and “Maybe you should decide which way you want to go.” I was quite dismayed by these comments – after all this time and effort, was I still so obviously in conflict? I didn’t have an answer at the time but it caused me to think long and hard about where I was on my journey. The following is how I would have liked to explain things:

We are all in conflict with our thoughts and actions – that is part of the human condition. We say one thing and do something else. There is always a disparity between what we would like people to think we are and who we are in reality. How many of us act exactly the same way in private as we do when we’re in company or at satsang? When we have decided to take one course of action, why are we tempted to do something else which is at odds with that decision? Interesting questions, but how do we explain our behaviour?

As humans, we are made up of the body, the mind and the soul. We often hear therapists talk about the ‘mind, body and spirit’ especially in relation to healing physical ailments. We may get the impression that, if we can bring the body, mind and spirit into harmony, we will lead comfortable lives. However, this would be a misunderstanding of the real relationship among the three.

Mind and spirit are not there to serve the body. Instead, the purpose of the human body is to act as a vehicle for the mind and soul; it is the only form through which the soul can return to its original home. And whilst we remain in the material body, the extent to which we experience pleasure or pain depends entirely upon our karmas.

We have got things upside down and back to front because our lives have always been ruled by our mind, relentlessly trying to find happiness in the world, and moving in completely the opposite direction from our soul.

If we are extremely fortunate, we eventually realize that the world just can't deliver what the mind is looking for. We become disillusioned with life, perhaps feeling let down by our family and friends, and dissatisfied with our jobs. This is the point when we think, "There must be more to life than this – what is the point of my existence?" This moment of realization is not something we initiate ourselves, and it may be the time when a spiritual Master makes his connection with our soul and awakens that spark within us; if so, it is truly the greatest thing that could ever happen to a human being.

The greatest battle of all

But this is when the battle intensifies between the mind and the soul – and what a mighty battle it becomes! Throughout the ages, all saints have agreed that the mind is the biggest obstacle to overcome on one's spiritual journey. That's because the mind doesn't give up easily; in fact, the more the soul tries to connect with its source, the harder it will try to stop the soul.

According to the philosophy of Sant Mat, we have been accumulating karmas since time began because all actions create karma. We enter the world to pay off the karmic debts from previous births but, through our actions, end up creating more karma. We continue to exist, therefore, in this never-ending cycle of birth and death – the cycle of transmigration.

My friend also observed that an illness I had contracted years ago started roughly at the same time I had been initiated and wondered

if there was any connection. Again, after some reflection, I confirmed that this could be so and offered the following explanation.

When we make a concerted effort to break the cycle of transmigration through spiritual practice, we start to pay off our karmic debt and this can sometimes lead to a lot of suffering. The only consolation is that if one applies oneself to the spiritual practice with determination, the hardships become much more bearable, as we stop seeing them in a negative way, as something 'bad'. Illness, including its length and severity, is one means of paying off karma. This could explain why some illnesses resolve seemingly of their own accord, whilst others do not respond to any kind of treatment.

It's not all doom and gloom

The purpose of meditation is to release the stranglehold the mind has over the soul by turning its attention away from the attractions of the world, and slowing down its activity until it finally becomes motionless. This can take a lifetime to achieve and requires an enormous amount of dedicated effort on our part together with the help of the Master. In the meantime, it is not surprising that, along the way, there is some conflict between our aspirations and the dictates of our mind. However, it's not all doom and gloom.

With constant practice, the mind learns that stillness can be enjoyable and eventually the soul is able to bask in the light of its true home, captivated by the enchanting sound of its power source, floating in God's love.

Some see the spiritual path as a cop-out from life, for losers who can't cut it in the 'real' world, or as a dismal existence of abstinence and deprivation. Nothing could be further from the truth, as it takes a great deal of courage to swim against the tide of the rest of humanity. It's far

easier to give in to the mind with its addictions and obsessions than to stand in defiance and go the other way.

The purpose of our human existence is to find fulfilment and freedom, but not in the material world. We are spiritual beings and we will never find peace in the transitory and ever-changing things of the world. Contentment arises through the stillness of the mind and our fulfilment as human beings comes about as we learn to hold the mind in one-pointed concentration. True freedom is only achieved when the soul is finally released from the clutches of the mind and merges back into the ocean of bliss forever.



A great Japanese warrior named Nobunaga decided to attack the enemy although he had only one tenth the number of men the opposition commanded. He knew that he would win, but his soldiers were in doubt.

On the way he stopped at a Shinto shrine and told his men, "After I visit the shrine I will toss a coin. If heads comes, we will win; if tails, we will lose. Destiny holds us in her hand."

Nobunaga entered the shrine and offered a silent prayer. He came forth and tossed a coin. Heads appeared. His soldiers were so eager to fight that they won their battle easily.

"No-one can change the hand of destiny," his attendant told him after the battle.

"Indeed not," said Nobunaga, showing a coin which had been doubled, with heads facing either way.

Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*

Echoes of Macbeth

The plays of Shakespeare are known across the world for some profound insights into human life. In the passage from *Macbeth* quoted below, Macbeth has just received news of his wife's suicide, the last straw in a string of disasters which have followed the couple's traitorous murder of King Duncan. In a bid for the crown, they had murdered him as he slept as a guest in their castle and, from that night on, they experienced agonies of conscience. Now, at Lady Macbeth's death, Macbeth cannot wait to end the hollow despair that has overtaken his life.

*Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.*

Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 5

In the following extract, Maharaj Sawan Singh takes up Shakespeare's words:

Our attachment to this earth, which is not our true abode, is extraordinary. When the infant arrives in this world, his attention is turned inward. But soon he opens his eyes, beholds the material world and forthwith falls a prey to its lure, gradually forgetting all about his divine home. The child harkens with his ears and starts listening to the conversation of

those around him. His contact with the earth becomes closer. When he learns to talk, he is firmly bound to father and mother, sister and brother and the like. And in the end, after passing through all the seven stages of life, after fretting and strutting its hour upon the stage, the soul of man finds itself burdened with its earthly freight that has been collected during its lifetime.

Discourses on Sant Mat

The Great Master wonders at our “extraordinary” attachment to the physical world. He tells us how, as newborn infants, we are soon lured outward into the “strut and fret” of life and quickly forget our divine home. Yet, however much we distract ourselves with worldly pleasures – our family, our friends, our possessions – we eventually come to realize that the routines of life are empty and futile.

Some modern philosophers have come to the same conclusion as Macbeth, seeing life as an empty, pointless charade. If our viewpoint remains one-dimensional and focused entirely on this physical world, then this conclusion is almost inevitable.

True mystics tell us, however, that this creation was never meant to be a paradise. It is a stage on which we act out our karmas, lifetime after lifetime. Once we have awoken to our real condition, our purpose in life should be to loosen the bonds of attachment as quickly as we can. If we do this, we will be able to experience a higher level of consciousness and realize our true self as the soul, a spark of the Lord himself. However, as the Great Master explains in *Spiritual Discourses*, such realization can only take place if we come into contact with a perfect saint who awakens us from the daydream we mistakenly perceive to be reality:

After being asleep for countless lifetimes, it is when we come into the presence of a saint that we wake up and understand. We understand the true nature of the relationship between the individual and the supreme being, the nature of the obstacle between them and how to get rid of that obstacle.

By showing us how we can overcome the obstacle that stands between us and the Lord, the saints help us achieve our true purpose in life. If we acted upon their instructions, we would see for ourselves the difference between life in the material world (which is an illusion) and ultimate truth and reality:

Compared with life in the worlds above the eye focus, the life below the eye focus (our present condition) is no better than a dream. If people would go inside the focus, and enter the upper worlds, they would become eternally happy. Empty talk would cease. They would contemplate the Grand Reality.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

When we understand the true purpose of life and stop chasing the illusion, we begin to see the inner light radiating from everywhere and even the physical world becomes beautiful. In *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. II*, the Great Master described this change when he says, “A palace will appear as dreadful as a graveyard to a person bereft of love. But even the ill-furnished and dilapidated huts are beautiful if they are brightened with the spark of love.”

The transformation from disillusion and even horror, in which life is viewed as no more than “a tale told by an idiot”, to faith and wonder comes about according to the focus of our attention. Maharaj Charan Singh used to tell the story of a child who goes to the fair with his

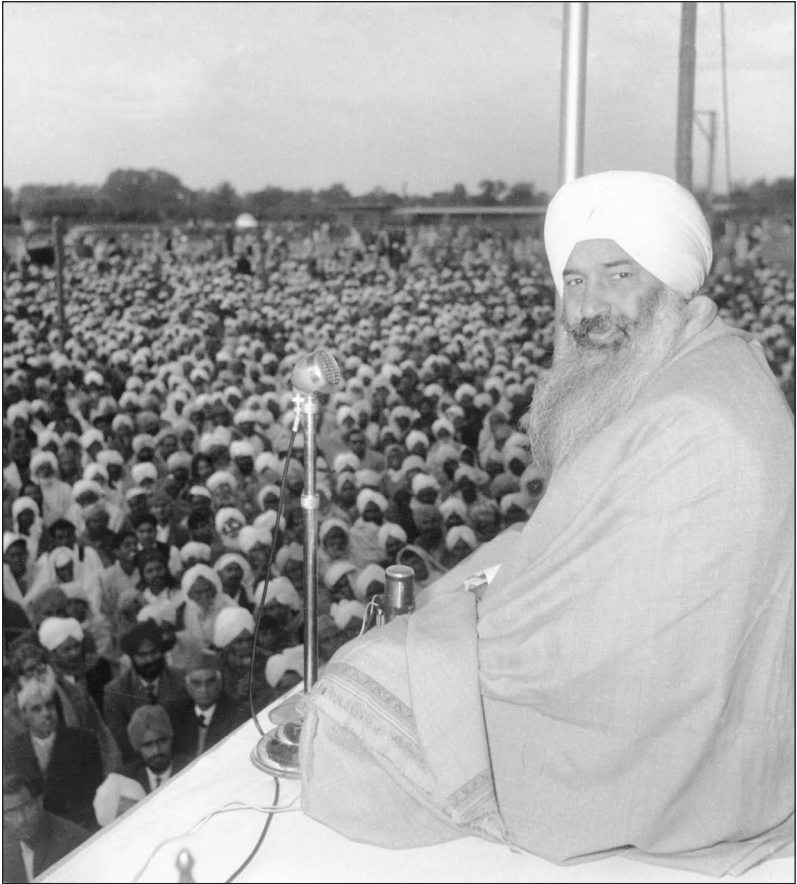
father. As long as he holds his father's hand (i.e. when the soul remains in touch with God) the boy finds the fair full of interest and joy, but as soon as he loses his father in the crowd, the fair becomes a nightmare to him. What should he do in such a situation? The immediate solution is for the boy to call out to his father with all his might.

Macbeth may move inexorably towards its tragic climax, but for us, when faced with our personal demons, there is the happier option of invoking the power of love to come to our aid. It is this, our own effort and God's grace, which will close the door on tragedy and ensure that we move forward into a world of light.



We must remember that this superficial 'I' is not our real self. It is our 'individuality' and our 'empirical self' but it is not truly the hidden and mysterious person in whom we subsist before the eyes of God. The 'I' that works in the world, thinks about itself, observes its own reactions and talks about itself is not the true 'I' that has been united to God in Christ. It is at best the vesture, the mask, the disguise of that mysterious and unknown 'self' whom most of us never discover until we are dead. Our external, superficial self is not eternal, not spiritual. Far from it... Contemplation is precisely the awareness that this 'I' is really 'not I' and the awakening of the unknown 'I' that is beyond observation and reflection and is incapable of commenting upon itself. It cannot even say "I" with the assurance and impertinence of the other one, for its very nature is to be hidden, unnamed, unidentified ... the true 'I' remains both inarticulate and invisible because it has altogether too much to say – not one word of which is about itself.

Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation*



Maharaj Charan Singh

The Power of Satsang

*Taste the nectar of satsang, O friend;
Oh, savour the elixir of satsang.
At the outset it tastes sharp and acrid,
But soon, like mango, it is juicy and sweet.*

Mira, The Divine Lover

In locations outside India where discourses on Sant Mat are given in both Punjabi and the mother tongue of that country, we all enjoy the opportunity to hear the teachings in our own language. And the recent development of simultaneous translation now available in the Dera and at some other centres means that, as we listen to the Master's words, language barriers are virtually dissolved. We can all share the same listening experience and benefit from the spiritual truths conveyed. This is a wonderful gift, and is deeply appreciated.

That said, we also know that the foundation of satsang lies in something far deeper than language.

I recall a French lady attending Baba Ji's satsang programme in Paris during August 1999. She addressed him in French and confessed that, despite intending to learn English in order to understand his discourse, she was very sorry that she had not managed to do so. Lovingly, Baba Ji responded with words to the effect that there was no need to worry because Sant Mat is a language of love.

In Mirabai's beautiful poem entitled "Satsang", she urges the disciple to "taste the nectar of satsang", as keeping the company of saints and listening to their discourse will help quench our spiritual thirst and enlighten us about the Lord. The whole atmosphere of satsang plays its part.

As Mirabai observes, however, the mind may not initially be attracted by satsang, resisting what it hears. Satsang tastes “sharp and acrid” because our minds have been used to enjoying the colourful fair of the world. Yet, after a while, as we begin to understand the spiritual truths explained by our Master, satsang, like a ripe mango, starts to taste “juicy and sweet”.

The Masters often describe this world as a deep and dangerous ocean in which we, struggling souls, are attempting to get from one shore to the other, whilst being tossed about on the rough waves. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Hazur Maharaj Ji describes satsang as a great anchor amidst the turmoil of our minds. He says:

If your boat is caught in a storm and you reach the shore, you feel so relieved. We are all in the storm of our mind, and when we go to the satsang of the mystics, we find we can land on the shore. How relieved we feel. Satsang is a great anchor.

So, attending satsang and hearing about the Lord is a great source of comfort for us in this stormy ocean of the world and perhaps somewhere we can find peace. Even more importantly, the company of the Master and attending his satsang brings the disciple into contact with that power that will develop the love and devotion for the Lord that is latent within us. We find an inner strength.

Indeed, Mirabai sings the praises of satsang precisely because it helps turn our direction to the Lord. It has an inherent power to ignite a fire of love in our heart for the Master and to shift our focus from materialism and the physical world towards God and the inner spiritual path. Just as a philosopher’s stone turns ordinary metal into gold; just as the essence of the flower turns oil into perfume, so too does satsang bring out qualities of spirituality and truth.

Satsang is of vital importance, as this is where we come close to the beautiful way of life embodied by the Master and learn the theory behind Sant Mat. However, we must put that theory into practice through our meditation. We should not mistakenly believe that merely sitting in satsang regularly will give us salvation. As Baba Ji repeatedly reminds us, we must act upon what we hear. This is the most crucial part of our adherence to the path. At the time of death, our spiritual wealth will not be measured by how many satsangs we have attended. Rather, it will be measured by how much meditation we have undertaken.

Again, through our very attempts to put theory into practice, we can relate to Mirabai's observation. The early stages of our meditation can seem "sharp and acrid". It is at this point that attending satsang becomes even more important, as it strengthens our faith and supports our meditation. During a question-and-answer session, Hazur Maharaj Ji responded to a disciple that satsangs are for the satisfaction of the mind, helping to persuade the mind to go back to its own origin. Similarly, Maharaj Sawan Singh used to compare satsang to the fence around the crop of meditation and to precious water which keeps alive the enthusiasm for bhajan and simran. He advised the sangat always to give time to satsang as far as circumstances allow.

The conclusion is clear: whilst we should give as much time as possible to our meditation because it is key to our spiritual progress, we should try to combine this with attending satsang, as this helps to maintain our love for the path and stimulates the desire for meditation. This desire will eventually lead us to the ultimate satsang, which is the merging of the soul with the Shabd within and reunion with the Lord forever.



You Can Do It!

Sant Mat is the easiest path for self-realization and God-realization. When satsangis used to ask Maharaj Charan Singh if there is an easier method, he would reply that nothing is simpler than meditation. Similarly, Baba Gurinder Singh says that all we have to do is to learn to sit and do nothing.

Yet satsangis find it hard to do their meditation. Whilst most can keep to the vegetarian diet, abstain from alcohol and drugs, and – although there are many subtleties we may overlook – live a good moral life, it's meditation that they find difficult. Nonetheless, meditation is the Satguru's *hukam* – his order or will.

And although we find meditation difficult, it is not as difficult as is often depicted. It depends on our attitude. As Baba Ji says, if you think meditation is easy then it is easy, if you think it is difficult then it is difficult.

Recently, after looking at a review in this magazine, I read a book which describes the experience of a western Buddhist nun and what she had to go through in her search for spiritual enlightenment. She spent twelve years in a remote cave, 13,000 feet up in the Himalayas, cut off from the world by mountains and snow. Three of these years were spent in complete isolation as she engaged in intense meditation. She faced unimaginable cold, wild animals, near starvation and avalanches. The following paragraph captures her existence:

Every day for the months and years she was in formal retreat inside her cave she got into her meditation box and followed the same gruelling, utterly repetitive routine: Up at 3 a.m. for the first three-hour meditation session; 6 a.m. breakfast (tea and

tsampa); 8 a.m. back into the box for the second three-hour meditation session; 11 a.m. lunch and a break; 3 p.m. return to the box for the third three-hour meditation session; 6 p.m. tea; 7 p.m. the fourth three-hour session; 10 p.m 'bed'.... All in all that amounted to twelve hours of meditation a day – day in, day out, for weeks, months and years on end.

Vicki Mackenzie, *Cave in the Snow*

This shows how determined some people are to attain spiritual enlightenment and the hardships they are prepared to face. It is incredible. To me, the cold is probably one of the greatest adversities the nun endured:

And then there was the cold. That tremendous unremitting, penetrating cold that went on for month after month on end. In the valley below the temperature would regularly plunge to –35 degrees in winter. Up on that exposed mountain it was even bleaker. There were huge snow drifts that piled up against her cave and howling winds to contend with too.

Reading this helps to put the Sant Mat way of life into perspective, which, as the Masters say, is the easiest path. The Masters tell us to live normally. Perform your duties to yourself, to your family, to society, but also give daily time to meditation – live Sant Mat. This is easy. In fact, the Masters couldn't have made it any easier. In the Adi Granth it says:

O Nanak, meeting the true Master, one learns the perfect way to live. Then laughing, playing, dressing or eating, while living in maya, one finds liberation.



Book Review



The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov

EDITED BY YITZHAK BUXBAUM

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Some like to have their spiritual instructions delivered in a rational, straightforward or even scientific language. Others want their spirituality in devotional tones: with poetry, colourful imagery and appeals to the heart. Then there are those of us who are happiest when the life of the spirit is illustrated by a story.

One of the great storytellers in the mystic tradition of Judaism was the Baal Shem Tov, also called the Besht. The founder of the Hasidic movement, the Baal Shem Tov lived from 1698–1760 in what is now Poland and the Ukraine. He was a controversial rabbi in his own time, probably because his teaching – offering a mystic path to God accessible to all – contrasted with the elitism of many Torah scholars.

In *The Light and Fire of the Baal Shem Tov*, the editor, Yitzhak Buxbaum offers his own selection from a variety of traditional material about the Baal Shem Tov, including disciples' descriptions of the Besht, tales from his life, and the stories he told to illustrate his spiritual teachings. Many passages about the Besht's life revolve around rituals and customs specific to Judaism; for understanding these, the glossary at the back of the book is helpful. The Besht's teaching stories, on the other hand, are very simple to understand, and indeed seem universal in their appeal.

The reminiscences by disciples offer heartfelt, sometimes ecstatic, reflections about what it means to be a disciple, to be on a spiritual path and moving towards God. They describe how disciples felt in the Besht's presence:

It was not only what he said, but how he said it, and who was saying it. As soon as he opened his holy mouth, they felt elevated. The very sound of his sweet voice was like a balm to troubled souls.

His face shone like the face of an angel of God and his word were the words of the Shechinah [Indwelling Divine Presence] speaking from his throat.... [He] taught them Torah the way it is taught in the Garden of Eden, and his disciples could smell the fragrance of paradise that filled the room. Its perfume was so ravishing that their souls almost flew away with each word that he uttered. Everything he said was perfectly true, directly from heaven.

Although many miracle stories are included, the reader can observe how for his disciples the greatest miracle was the master himself.

The Baal Shem Tov's disciples saw with their own eyes that the glory and the majesty of the greatest king was insignificant next to the glory and the majesty of their holy master. And the self-effacement of the lowliest beggar, who is contemptible in his own eyes, was insignificant next to the self-effacement of the holy Baal Shem Tov. His light was like the light of the Holy One, blessed be He, which is infinitely high and exalted above everything, yet is infinitely low, descending to the lowest depths.

Despite the value of these accounts, it will likely be the Besht's stories that the reader will best remember, and turn to again and again. In one story, to incite his disciples to strive to realize God now, while living, the Besht uses the most homely, everyday and sweet analogy possible:

When a father wants to play with his little child, he hides his face with his hand, and then shows his face to him – doing this again and again. But the father's pleasure is even greater when the child is clever enough to push his father's hand away, so that it no longer conceals his face. God's glory fills the earth, and there is no place where He is not present. When it seems that he is absent, he is merely hiding His face from you. But if you know that he is hiding, there is no more concealment. If you truly want the game to end, and to see Him always, push your Father's hand away to see His face.

In many stories the Besht extols the humble, simple and sincere devotion of the poor and uneducated. Once he stood on the street corner gathering a crowd of listeners as he related the long and winding “Tale of the Sigh and the Sneer.” He told of a poor man who worked all day, barely able to feed his family, who was exhausted at the time of evening prayer. Uneducated, he couldn’t say the prayers properly. Each evening as he walked home after prayers, deeply aware of his own failings, he sighed, wishing he could devote himself more completely to God. Meanwhile, in the same village, a wealthy Torah scholar spent his entire day in prayer and studying the scriptures. Each evening, walking home after prayers, he saw the poor man who made so many mistakes in his prayers, and a sneer formed on his lips.

Years later, both of them died. When the Torah scholar’s many pious deeds were weighed on the scales, that sneer – placed on the other side of the scales – weighed heavier than all the scholar’s prayers. But when the poor man stood before the judges, ashamed because he had hardly any pious deeds to put onto the scales, an angel put that sigh onto the scales, and it weighed so much that it tipped the scales to the side of the good.

In another story, the Besht suggests that the path of divine service may not be so much “to focus on increasing your efforts to do God’s will, but rather to accept God’s will in the events of life.”

A disciple of the Baal Shem Tov wanted to live comfortably, like a normal person, but also to be properly spiritual. So he went to the Master and said, “Rabbi, I’m not capable of doing anything extraordinary in serving God. Please give me some divine service to concentrate on so that I’ll have this world and also the world-to-come.” The Baal Shem Tov answered him, “I’ll give you the service of being happy with your portion in this world.” “Rabbi,” said the man, “that is still very difficult!” “That is what I intended,” replied the Rabbi.

On another occasion a disciple complained that when he had first sought God, he had been full of faith and enthusiasm and had experienced great joy, but that over the years his devotional life had

grown flat and uninspired, except when he was in the presence of the Besht. The Besht answered with a story:

A person went into a store to buy sweets, and the shopkeeper let him taste the candies. But when the customer wanted to continue tasting, the shopkeeper said, "I let you have a taste so that you'd know how good everything is. But if you want to have more, you'll have to pay. I didn't treat you for nothing!" God gives a person a taste of the sweetness of the Hidden Light. But after that, he must pay; he must exert himself to achieve and earn that joy and light in the future, to make it a spiritual possession, to win mystic consciousness, and the bliss of 'd'vekut' [cleaving with intense love to God; God-consciousness]. That is your task now.

According to the Hasidic tradition, relating stories about the *tzaddikim* (spiritual masters) has great spiritual value, for these "are the stories of God's doings in this world; they tell of the meeting of heaven and earth.... Tales of the *Tzaddikim* awaken the heart and kindle the inner fires of love for God.... Your heart will awaken from its slumber and say to you, 'Why should I also not seek intimacy with my Father in heaven?'"



