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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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He Is the Only One

*He is deathless, so I am fearless;
He does not desert me, and I am not a prisoner;
He is not a pauper, and I am not hungry;
He has no cares, and I have no trouble;
Him no one can destroy;
He is the one who gives life;
He is free from bondage, and we are not bound;
He does not have to toil, and we are not slaves;
He is not attached, and we are not attached;
He is bliss, and we are happy in His Will;
He is not worried, and we have no cares;
He is not stained, and we too are not stained;
He is not hungry, and we have no hunger;
He is pure, and we are pure because of Him;
We are nothing; He is the only One;
He is both in front and behind;
O Nanak: The Guru removes all delusion and doubts;
I have become one by uniting with Him.*

Guru Arjan Dev, *Adi Granth*





Humility

All mystics consider humility to be one of the fundamental virtues underpinning spirituality. In *Spiritual Perspectives Vol. III* Maharaj Charan Singh states that humility, like love, is a precursor to developing other virtues: “When love comes, or humility comes, all other qualities come like cream on milk.” He further highlights the importance of this virtue in *Quest for Light*:

The one thing all of us on the path of Sant Mat have to understand is the value of humility. Meekness and humility are great virtues upon this path and unless we acquire them and do away with our ego and pride, progress is most difficult.

This article explores why humility is so important to our spiritual development, outlines its different facets and examines ways in which it can be nurtured.

Ego – The antithesis of humility

The Oxford Dictionary defines humility as having “a modest or low view of one’s importance”. From a spiritual perspective, this definition only takes us part-way to understanding the true nature of humility. A deeper insight can be gained by reflecting on the observations made above by Maharaj Charan Singh, in which he emphasizes the importance of eradicating our ego. Essentially, we can only come to understand what humility is by first acknowledging what it is that prevents us from developing this virtue – the ego.

So, what is the ego? The ego is that faculty of the mind which provides us with self-awareness and a consciousness of our separate

existence. It is the feeling of “I” ness: “I’m me. I’m not you, or a tree or a dog or a chair. I’m this sex, this age, of this country”, and so on. Ego is our individuality, something we consciously try to cultivate; it comprises all the attributes and qualities that we feel define us. Whilst the ego is necessary for us to be able to function on the physical plane, a highly developed sense of the ego is detrimental to our spiritual development. In cultivating our individuality, we differentiate ourselves from others in the creation and from the Lord and this has significant consequences.

First, in emphasizing our individuality, we risk attributing our positive qualities and achievements directly to ourselves – we feel responsible for them, believing them to be the product of our strengths and effort. However, as the mystics explain, this is false pride because everything we have has actually been given to us by the Shabd. It is the ego which makes the mistake of thinking that ‘I’ have achieved this, ‘I’ am clever, ‘I’ am beautiful, ‘I’ am rich and so on. In reality, we are little more than custodians of ‘our’ qualities, achievements and possessions. Our role is to be grateful for what has been bestowed on us, to look after these gifts to the best of our ability and not become too distressed if they are taken away.

Yet, given our long history of viewing ourselves as individuals and with our limited vision of the workings of the Shabd, it is difficult to cultivate such an attitude. We see what appear to be the causes and effects of actions without always being able to see the big picture. For example, if we worked hard to qualify for a place at university, we may feel entitled to feel pleased with ourselves. And whilst it is all right to derive some degree of satisfaction, we should not forget who placed us in an environment to do that work or gave us the ability to do so. In *Spiritual Perspectives Vol. III* Maharaj Charan Singh reminds us to

remember the Giver by saying, “We are no one ... give credit to the Father and [do] not be egoistic about achievements.”

The second consequence of viewing ourselves as individual entities, separate from the world and from the Shabd, is that we mistake the true nature of our identity. We associate it with our mind, our likes and dislikes, our personality – in short, we have come to believe that our ego is our identity. But as explained very clearly in *Living Meditation*, our ego is a mask that we have created to cover our true self. It is a false, temporary identity that stops us from being receptive to the truth and realizing that our true nature is the Shabd. We have to eliminate the ego to achieve this level of understanding. Moreover, it is only when we eliminate the ego that we can be humble. Maharaj Charan Singh writes in *Spiritual Perspectives Vol. III*: “So long as the ego is there, we can never be humble; we can never be meek. When we are able to eliminate our ego and seek the Lord within ourselves and in the whole creation, naturally we will be humble. That is real humility.”

The signs of humility

So the ego is a barrier that prevents us from being humble. But what are the distinguishing features of true humility? To answer this, we need look no further than the Masters. They are a personification of true humility; it is an essential part of their nature, reflected in their every glance, thought, and action. The following incident, which was related about Maharaj Charan Singh in *Treasure Beyond Measure*, illustrates this more clearly than any lengthy exposition:

A sadhu who once came to meet Maharaj Ji, on seeing him bow to him before he could himself bow, felt so overwhelmed by Maharaj Ji’s humility that he asked him: “Whenever we go to saints or to religious leaders either for an interview or at

a gathering, they expect us to bow to them. This is the usual custom. This is the only place where I have seen a Master bowing to the disciples first. Why is this so?” Maharaj Ji replied, “I am the servant of the Lord, and the Lord is in everyone.”

This shows us that the Masters see no separation; they see the Lord in everything and everyone and are conscious that he is the only one who exists. This is the basis of their profound humility. Again, this draws our attention to the importance of overcoming the ego. It is only when this occurs that we will be filled with the depth and intensity of love for the Lord. In *Spiritual Perspectives Vol. III* Maharaj Charan Singh states:

If there is love, automatically there is humility in it. There can be no love without humility. Love makes you humble. Love makes you meek. Love means you want to do that which pleases the other person, not what pleases yourself.... There's more happiness in giving than taking.

This quotation draws attention to a further facet of humility – suppressing one's own desires specifically to meet those of the beloved. In our case this means making the effort to think and act in ways which will please the Master. Of course we know that this means practising our meditation, but it also refers to being conscious throughout the day about making choices that will support tomorrow's meditation. For example, repeating simran rather than indulging in the chatter of the mind, going to bed on time rather than partying till late. It means not reacting to any criticism or anger levied at us and not dwelling on it either. It means putting other people's needs before ours, not just in the home and in our seva, but in the

workplace and society at large. Essentially, it means changing the habit of countless lifetimes – where previously our actions have been determined by the senses, they now are to be determined by love for the Master. The very first step we take in doing so is a sign of humility because we are beginning to recognize our insignificance and are trying no longer to be motivated by what our ego wants us to do. By and by, our ego will be weakened and we will start to experience and reflect love and humility.

Cultivating humility

Real humility can only be learnt from a perfect living Master. He teaches us the method that will eradicate our ego – the barrier which stands between us and the Lord. Deep, sincere humility will emerge through meditation when we come into contact with the Shabd and are able to acknowledge fully his magnificence.

However, even before we reach such a high level of realization, there are other ways in which we can cultivate humility. By approaching the Master with modesty and meekness, we increase our receptivity to his grace. The emotional pull that this triggers creates a certain level of humility as we feel his greatness and, simultaneously, acknowledge our weaknesses. We can develop this further by using our intellect to engage with the teachings of the mystics. In so doing we will appreciate that within us lies the macrocosm, which contains billions and billions of universes. We may come to realize that our individual existence within this vast creation is as insignificant as a grain of sand. Hopefully, this understanding will help us to place a higher priority on our spiritual development than on our physical desires.

Finally, the way we approach meditation will also help us cultivate humility. Our feeble effort, by itself, will not take us home, even if we meditated for a hundred thousand years. The most we can hope

to achieve is to invoke the Master's grace – he, in his mercy, will eventually fulfil all our spiritual aspirations. Therefore, when our mind wanders during meditation, let's try not to become frustrated, convincing ourselves that we will never learn to meditate 'properly' or 'effectively'. Such dissatisfaction is a reflection of the ego, the underlying implication being that it is we – the individual – who is responsible for all spiritual progress. By contrast, if we are humble, we accept that it is the nature of the mind to conjure up thought after thought and that our job is simply to begin our simran over again.

Further, whilst it is the ego that wants 'achievement', another part of ourselves is meditating because we want to make the Master happy. If we focus on this and meditate to offer ourselves completely to him, eventually, we will come into contact with the Shabd, which will clean the mind of the ego and take the soul in and up. The Radiant Form of the Master will meet our real self – the soul – at the first stage and from there onwards, throughout the rest of our journey, there will be a continual merging of our smaller selves with the larger self – the Shabd. At each stage, we have to be humble enough to allow something to be discarded. Finally, there is no individual left, no separation, no you and I, only union. That is the ultimate result of humility.



The Person You Can Become

There are two distinct personalities within your character: the person you are and the person you would like to become. Unless the former personality is working in harmony towards the latter, you will experience bitter frustration and disappointment in your daily living.

To dream of the heights to which you would rise is a worthwhile occupation if you are prepared to advance beyond dreaming and work and plan to become the person God wants you to be.

Within you lies a potential for spiritual growth that is so great even you cannot fathom its depths.

There are rare moments, perhaps, when you have been deeply moved, when you are conscious of a quality in your life you never knew you possessed, but when the old life reasserts itself this moment of beauty becomes a memory and you eventually wonder if it was ever yours.

Spiritual greatness can be yours when your life is lived in harmony with God; when there is no jarring emotion or false pride, and when your whole being responds to his love with joy and thanksgiving.

If such a way of life sounds too idealistic to be true, it is because your values are still based upon inadequacy and you have not yet caught the vision of what life can become if lived in company with God.

Carl Gates, *Faith for Daily Living*



At the moment we are blessed with human life and with all the possibilities that this implies... When we die nothing can be taken with us but the seeds of our life's work and our spiritual knowledge.

Dalai Lama, *The Little Book of Wisdom*

Surviving the Desert

Anyone who has taken the tube in London will have heard the phrase “Mind the gap!” being announced over the public address system upon arrival at their destination; this is because of the space between the train and platform. As travellers on the Sant Mat journey, this is a useful phrase for us to remember. To us it means, keep alert to that space that separates us from the world, it is precious!

Throughout the ages, great spiritual teachers have urged disciples to make meditation their first priority. They have been trying to make us realize a truth that they already know – namely, meditation helps us separate ourselves from the world and, in so doing, it brings us closer to our real identity and closer to the Lord.

In the past, spiritual practitioners would often hide away in wild, remote places, physically distancing themselves from their communities in order to become detached from the material life. Early Christian ascetics, known as the Desert Fathers, for example, lived in the desert in Egypt to find the kingdom of heaven as described by Jesus Christ. Similarly, many yogis renounce the world, giving up family, friends and daily comforts to live in jungles or high up in the mountains.

True Masters today don't ask us to renounce the world in such drastic ways, emphasizing that attachment to the Shabd is the most powerful and effective way to become detached. Yet, in a way, our meditation is the equivalent of going into the desert and forsaking the world. At the very least, our daily practice establishes a physical separation between us and the outside. For those two-and-a-half hours (or whatever time we can give) we can't engage in any other pursuits, be they related to work, family, or leisure. By carving out this time just

for ourselves and our Master, we are, in fact, creating a very marked gap between us and our worldly concerns.

If we continue with the analogy and view our meditation as embarking on a journey into the desert or some other wilderness, we will see that it is important to be properly prepared. Our spiritual survival depends on this in the same way as that of the explorers embarking on some dangerous expedition, or the ascetics abandoning the comforts of life.

Ascetics and yogis make the decision to live semi-reclusive lives, away from the rest of humanity, because they're trying to simplify their lives. Relationships and possessions feel like a burden to them, holding them back from the inner wealth they're seeking. So, aside from the clothes on their back and a few other essentials, they leave behind all else. Explorers, in preparation for their risky voyages, think more carefully about what it is they want to take, selecting the most vital equipment. Leaving behind luxuries, they too are making an attempt at simplicity.

In a similar vein, whether we fully realize this or not, when we became initiated, we too made a commitment to try and lead a simple life in order to strengthen our efforts in meditation. Maharaj Jagat Singh advised us to eat less, sleep less, and talk less. Maharaj Charan Singh often said that we only need four things in life: food, fuel to keep warm, shelter and clothes. After securing these, we have only to attend to meditation. This advice may seem somewhat anachronistic to the modern lifestyle, but Baba Ji asks us to think about our priorities in life. He explains that there is nothing inherently wrong in being ambitious and working hard to secure material comforts. However, he makes us question the degree to which we have achieved the right balance – to what extent are we desiring more than earning our daily

bread and, perhaps, compromising our first priority, which is to attend to meditation and to create the conditions supporting this?

The purpose of life is to return to our true home and, for this journey, we already have what we need – our existence. The privilege of being granted a human birth in which the soul has a chance to realize itself, is all we need. Everything else is just luxury. We certainly don't need all the furniture, clothes, jewellery, apps, books or whatever else may be our personal penchant. As satsangis we don't have to renounce these objects outwardly – it really depends on our circumstances – but we should try not to be possessed by them, to not let them compromise our spiritual practice. Like the ascetics and the explorers who manage to survive effectively and efficiently with very little paraphernalia, we have to travel as lightly as possible to reach that separate space within.

Once we've created the two-and-a-half hours of physical separation from the world, naturally, the Masters want us to make the best use of it. They want us to experience that space fully, which means we can't let ourselves become weighed down by mental baggage. Thoughts and feelings from the previous day keep the mind tied to the outer rather than the inner realm. Our spiritual survival depends on learning to let go of all our joys and concerns, focusing instead on what's really important – learning to still the mind. At first, this may not seem possible. We struggle with a mind that is constantly trying to be anywhere – anywhere please! – rather than where it is actually meant to be, here in the present, at the eye centre.

Learning to still the mind is the biggest challenge we have to face. Like the yogis and ascetics living in their respective places of escape, we have to learn how to survive in our own individual desert. This involves training ourselves to be self-reliant. In other words, learning to love the silence and stillness of the desert, resisting all thoughts and

emotions related to the material world. It also involves identifying ourselves with spirit (Shabd) and relying only on spirit. This is our true identity and we can only rediscover it in the desert, that is, when we are able to achieve physical and mental separation from the world and, in that separation, are able to contact the Shabd form of the Master.

For this to occur, most of us will need to spend a long time in the desert, some of which we may experience as unpleasant. We may find ourselves literally existing in a gap, a no-man's-land where we're no longer fully involved in the world, but neither are we fully present with the Master. The Masters advise us to exploit this discomfort as it represents our loneliness, the yearning of our soul to return home, which, paradoxically, it can only do by spending more time in solitude and stillness.

During our long period in the desert, we may encounter many temptations. Perhaps the most insidious is to approach meditation expecting some kind of result. In so doing, there is a risk we could be tempted into finding fault with Sant Mat or the Master if our efforts do not bring immediate satisfaction or yield outcomes in the form we envisaged that they would. Yet another temptation is to pretend that the Master will do all the work and we have only to sit there. This is not what is meant by leaving everything to the Lord. We must make the effort to control our mind in meditation, as our effort is the catalyst for invoking his grace.

Eventually, by constantly cultivating that gap between us and the outside world through meditation, we will learn to live in our desert with contentment. We will feel freer and more buoyant, knowing that with each repetition of simran, we are truly on our way home.



The Father's Advice

There was once a hard-working and generous farmer who had several idle and greedy sons. On his deathbed he told them that they would find his treasure if they were to dig in a certain field. As soon as the old man was dead, the sons hurried to the fields and began digging earnestly, carefully turning over the soil from one end of the field to the other. Despite all their toil, the sons didn't find the gold. Eventually, they abandoned the search, thinking that in his generosity, their father must have given away the gold when he was alive.

Later on, it occurred to them that since the land had already been prepared, they might as well sow a crop. The next day, they planted wheat and then worked hard to nurture their crop. In time, this produced an abundant yield, which they sold for a handsome profit.

After the harvest was in, the sons thought again about their father's gold and the possibility that they might have missed it the first time. So, once more they dug the field and, once more, found no gold. After several years they became accustomed to the labour and to the cycle of the seasons. Finally, through their hard work, they gained enough wealth that they no longer wondered about the hidden hoard. Now they understood their father's method of training them, and they became honest and contented farmers.

So it is when wise men teach us how to make the best use of life. The teacher, faced with the students' misguided expectations, must direct them to an activity which is beneficial to them but which they can relate to. The true function of their activity may be hidden from the students – but it works, and that's the main thing!





Maharaj Charan Singh

*To me there is no other like you;
To you there are millions like me.
Read not my scroll of evil deeds,
Shut not your door on this wretched soul.
Had I not been steeped in sin, says Bahu,
On whom would you have showered your mercy?*

Sultan Bahu as quoted in Legacy of Love

Without Expectations

Faith is essential for a life devoted to walking the spiritual path. We start our journey on the basis of a belief and over time it is faith that makes it possible for us to keep going.

To understand how faith arises, how this process works, you could compare it to the time you followed the advice of your friend as to how best to boil potatoes. Based on her own experience, she advises you to use a pressure cooker since it is much more efficient than a regular pan. As she has no reason to mislead you, and is an experienced cook, you trust her advice; you believe her. It is not that you have *faith* in using the pressure cooker – not yet. You just *believe* and trust her. Besides, your friend explains how to use the pressure cooker with such simple, easy to follow instructions that you have confidence that you'll be able to learn how to do so.

So you buy a pressure cooker and take it home. You follow the instructions by filling it with water, salt and the potatoes, and closing the lid. During the cooking process, you do not look inside the pressure cooker. You hope all will be fine. Seven minutes later, you open the lid and, as predicted, the potatoes are perfectly cooked. At this moment, your belief in using the pressure cooker to boil potatoes quickly, has become firm through direct experience. The next time you use the pressure cooker, you will have faith in its cooking capability and your own ability for following the instructions accurately. Why? Because, as the Masters explain, faith develops and is strengthened once your initial belief and trust have been reinforced through experience.

Desire and expectation

Here on the physical plane we function through desire and expectation. We expect to fulfil our goals and are disappointed when we are unable to do so. For instance, when we are thirsty, we try to find a glass of water to drink because we expect that this will quench our thirst. So we fill a tall glass with water, drink it and, as expected, our thirst is quenched. If a desired outcome does not occur, we may question whether the action was the right one in the first place. If we conclude that it isn't, we may alter our actions in order to enhance the possibility of achieving our goal.

But whilst this process of desire, expectation and assessment of outcome is useful in everyday life, it can create obstacles if applied to the spiritual path. In *My Submission*, Maharaj Sawan Singh highlights the risk associated with seeking results from meditation and being disappointed when they do not materialize: "When a person realizes that despite his best efforts all his plans and endeavours have failed, he gets disheartened and gives up trying."

Giving up?

Before we asked for initiation, we believed in the Master and had a certain level of trust in the teachings. This was the basis of our journey – of approaching the path, approaching the Master and asking for initiation. After initiation we started to meditate. We started to apply the method, using ourselves as the tool. And what happened to most of us? Nothing! Or not much anyway. Because our expectations of meditation have not been met, some of us will be disappointed, at risk of starting to believe that the act of meditation makes no sense. In a vulnerable position, our mind provides a sneaky solution: meditate less – or why not even stop altogether? In adopting this course of action (or rather inaction), we no longer have any high expectations

regarding the effects of meditation and, consequently, no longer feel frustrated by the absence of results. Many of us have used this 'solution' to deal with the dashed expectations of what meditation will bring, at least at certain points in our lives.

But there is a term for dealing with expectations in this way: giving up! And giving up is fine. There is nothing wrong with giving up if you are willing to forsake the precious gift that you have been granted, abandoning your trust in the teacher, his teachings, and yourself in the process. None of us really wants this. But there is an alternative: We can remould our expectations of meditation instead of practising less. How do we do this?

Unconscious progress

We have to appreciate that although the teachings are simple, its workings are profound and hidden from view. Within an external framework of simplicity, our Master provides us with great comfort and protection whilst working his subtle changes. We could compare our spiritual journey to travelling on a night train from Delhi to Beas. The train moves fast and smoothly. Before sunrise, it is dark and, on peeking out of the window, we don't see much of the landscape passing by. Likewise, on our inward journey, we have to pass through many 'stations' and, because of the darkness, we may not even be aware that we have done so. Maybe we don't need this level of awareness; it could distract us from our final destination.

Think about the pressure cooker again. When we use it, we do not stir the food whilst cooking. We put the potatoes in and close the lid. Likewise, our lid will only be opened when the Master considers it time to do so. In *Spiritual Gems*, the Great Master informs a disciple, "The soul of every true follower is progressing internally even when he

is not aware of the progress ... the soul can enter Brahmand when he is unconscious of it.”

Inspiration

Despite such reassurances, many of us feel a need to reinforce our beliefs, especially since our expectations are raised after reading Sant Mat books and attending satsangs. However, we should keep in mind that one of the goals of satsang and the literature is to inspire us, both to seek the company of the Master, and to meditate. They are not the reality itself.

A famous story about the Buddha and his personal attendant Ananda illustrates the risks involved in using our limited faculties to understand the Truth. Whilst Ananda was very close to the Buddha, he still had doubts about attaining self-realization. So, one day, he said to the Buddha:

“Will you be compassionate enough to enlighten me so as to remove my remaining doubts so I can return to the Supreme Truth?”

Buddha said to him: “You listen to the dharma (the teachings) with the conditioned mind, and so the dharma becomes conditioned as well, and you do not obtain the Supreme Truth. It is like when someone points his finger at the moon to show it to someone else. Guided by the finger, that person should see the moon. If he looks at the finger instead and mistakes it for the moon, he loses not only the moon, but the finger also. Why? Because he mistakes the pointing finger for the bright moon.”

Surangama Sutra, as translated by Charles Luk

If we stop meditating or make less effort because our expectations have not been met, then, as the Buddha explains, we are missing the reality and the true nature of the way to that reality.

Our problem is that we use the teachings to create expectations based on what we can understand, even though Sant Mat is beyond what can be understood by the mind at the level of the physical. Our mind, however, dislikes being in a state of uncertainty. Nonetheless, this is what we have to endure in order to not “lose both the moon and the finger”. In fact, the eighth-century Zen Master Yongjia claimed, “Great Enlightenment comes from great doubt”, prompting the sixteenth-century Korean Master Xishan to proclaim that great faith and great will are also essential. In fact, if any one of these three elements is missing – doubt, faith or will – Xishan argues that spiritual practice becomes useless.

This implies that we should have great faith in the method, the Master, and in ourselves. We have no reason not to. The only thing we have to learn is to give up clinging to our conventional understanding, to learn to expect nothing, and to live with the great doubt that Master Xishan refers to. We are like a bird that has arrived at the high cliff. To travel further, we have to jump off the cliff into the unknown, spreading our wings through meditation. The Master will carry us and take us back to our true home. Until that time, the only thing we have to do is wait and practise flying. That is our path.



Feeling Funny



Head to the Open Country

*The world is a prison exercise yard.
Head this way, where there's open country.
Appearances are the prison walls
Which keep out that Reality.*

Timothy Freke, *Rumi Wisdom*

Rumi's verse is the clarion call of the Masters who take every opportunity to rescue us from our self-made and self-imposed prison yard. The chances are that unless we have come into contact with a perfect Master, we are unlikely to have any inkling that we have imprisoned ourselves in this way.

We blunder along blindly, being pushed from pillar to post, just hoping against hope that everything will turn out to our liking, without giving our souls, our real selves, a second thought. We may think that we can solve every problem life throws at us. Our mind may tell us that we can cope – we may even pride ourselves on our strength and ability to do so. But at some point, we realize that we can't – a great shock – and we are forced to acknowledge that we are much more vulnerable and much less powerful than we thought.

We may think that we can control events. Our mind may tell us that if we undertake a little preparation, everything will unfold as we plan. But then, how suddenly we are pulled up short when these plans go awry and we're at a loss as to explain why. We may even start to believe that the world is against us.

Impressed by the never-never land of films and television, we may think that all our dreams will come true – a perfect spouse, a

comfortable, happy life. But sooner or later we realize that this is an illusion. How could we have fooled ourselves?

These are the prison walls that we have built for ourselves – keeping the reality out. We shut out the reality of the true nature of the mind, which, unchecked, is only too ready to mislead; and perhaps more sadly, we shut out the reality of the divine nature of our soul within. As a result of the Master's grace, however, we wake up one day and realize that, miracle of miracles, there has been another possibility all along. "Open country", the liberation of our soul, is accessible the instant we are ready to 'let go' and recognize the power of the Divine over and beyond mind. We only have to change direction, shift our perspective, and relax.

So now, as we listen to the discourses and read the books, we find that there is a science of the soul enabling us to understand the nature of our mind and find our real self. We begin to realize that the very same mind that has been instrumental in keeping us prisoner has to be used to find our freedom. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains in *Spiritual Perspectives Vol. 1*:

Without the help of the mind, the soul would never be able to go back to the Father at all.

All your emotion, your devotion, your love to begin with are nothing but the outcome of mind. Mind is creating that love and devotion in you, and soul is taking advantage of it. So we have to win the friendship of the mind. From enmity, we have to get friendship.... When the tendency of the mind is upward, when it is full with devotion and love for the Father, then it is our best friend because the soul will become active only when it gets released from the mind.

So, rather than suppressing our mind in the hope that this will lead to freedom, maybe we have to use it more than ever. We could start to be ‘mindful’ – increasing our awareness of what we’re doing, where we’re going, and of our ultimate goal in life. Our intellect, sense of discrimination and ability to reason play an important role here. Maharaj Charan Singh again explains, “The Lord has given us intellect in order for us to know him, to realize him, to find him. That is why this sense of discretion has been given to us.” Elsewhere in the same volume he says, “The intellect is a faculty of the mind, but we have to use it in the right direction.”

By using our mind for the purpose it was meant for, eventually, we come to a second, more profound realization: the mind can take us only so far. It can convince us of a higher reality and identify the actions necessary to take us there, but the only way to make progress towards the open country, towards freedom, is the actual practice of meditation (stilling the mind). The more we practise with focused intent, the more progress we will make. Over time, we realize that various stages in our relationship with the mind are an essential part of our spiritual growing up. Saint Paul describes this process of transcendence most beautifully in his letter to the people of Corinth:

*For we know in part, and we prophesy in part,
But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in
part shall be done away.
When I was a child I spake as a child, I understood as a child,
I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away
childish things.*

Bible, I Corinthians 13:9

The mystics have given us a unique opportunity and, to some extent, the rewards are in our own hands. If we are lazy or make excuses, we make it difficult to head to the open country. But if we keep making the effort, little by little we will find that our mind starts to become our best friend and we begin to taste liberation.

As the following verse by Hafiz reminds us, we are the lucky ones who have been invited to travel to the open country:

*No one can resist a Divine Invitation.
That narrows down our choices
To just two:
We can come to God Dressed for Dancing,
Or
Be carried on a stretcher To God's Ward.*

Daniel Ladinsky, *I Heard God Laughing*

How we travel is up to us!



We are bound to each other by karmic strings – we come here to settle our karmic debits and credits. We come to this world as parents and children, as friends and relatives, but as soon as our karmic accounts for this life are settled we depart, each going his own way. This world is like an inn where we all gather together for the night, but at daybreak we all go our different ways. We are like birds that take shelter in a tree in the evening, but with the first light of dawn, each flies off on its own way.

Legacy of Love

Charity Supports Detachment

To foster detachment from the world and encourage love for the Creator, most spiritual traditions encourage us to give away a part of our earnings. Charity expresses the love that is the Creator by providing for others whose material circumstances make life difficult for them. Charity is not about the quantity given; it is about the love with which we give.

What we find in practice is that even though we may want to give in charity, we find it difficult to do so because we are attached to whatever we possess. We do not see that charity brings with it its own rewards. Giving away part of our hard-earned income inculcates in us awareness that of everything we have, we actually own nothing...

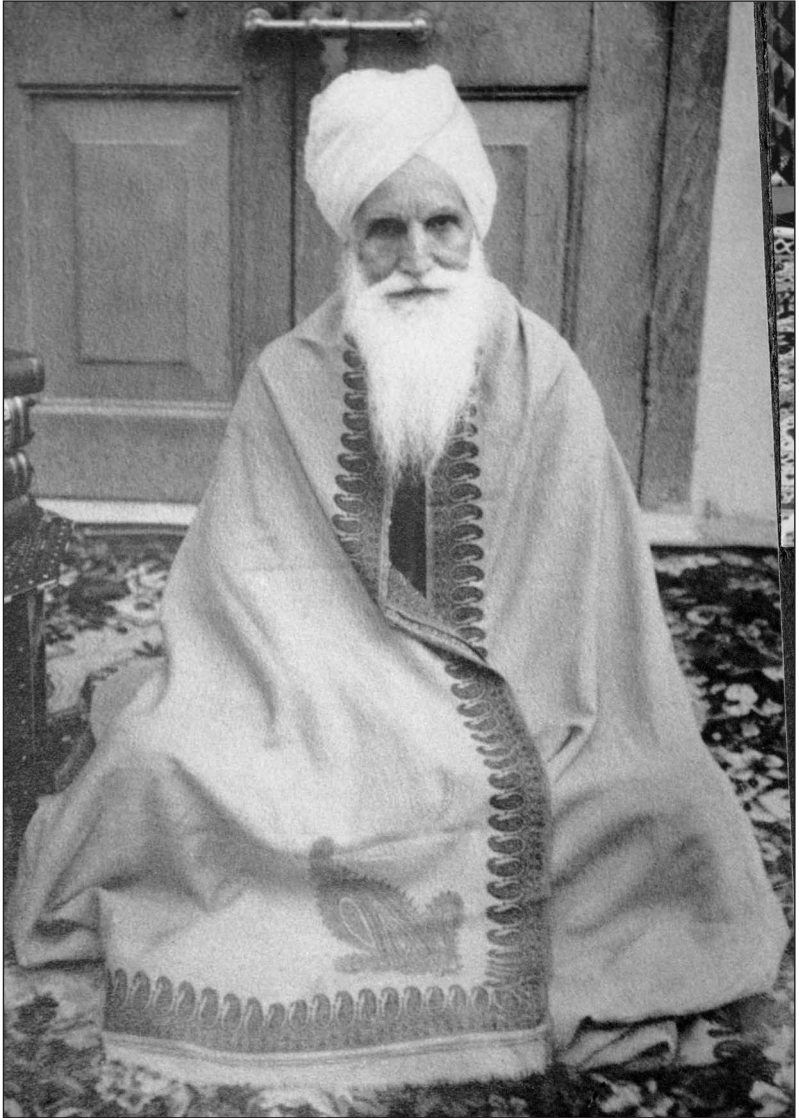
Everything that we think of as ours, whether it is family, friends, possessions or other forms of wealth, are gifts that have been placed in our keeping. If we understand this, we will develop in our hearts a spirit of charity towards all life. We can then enjoy whatever we have without becoming possessed.

Our only real possession is our spiritual wealth, which we earn through worshipping the Creator. Giving away some of our material wealth is a way of reminding ourselves of this fact, and of expressing our reverence and gratitude to the Creator...

True charity is liberating and strengthening. It frees the mind and reinforces our decision to cast in our lot with a power that promises infinitely more than all the wealth of the world can bring.

Honest Living





Maharaj Sawan Singh

Hidden Grace

Someone once asked the Besht [Ba'al Shem Tov] why it was that sometimes when a man attaches himself to the Lord, in the very middle of his attachment he finds himself suddenly very distant from God. The Besht answered him with a parable: When a father wants to teach his son to walk, what does he do? He takes his son and stands him on the ground in front of him, puts his hands out on either side so that the child does not fall, and the child walks between his father's hands. When the child comes close to where his father is standing, the father withdraws a little so that the child will come further and further. Thus the child learns to walk. So it is with God. When a man burns with religious fervour and cleaves to God, he withdraws from him, so that the man learns how to strengthen himself more and more in his attachment to the divine.

The Holy Name



The Master is always with you and giving proper help and guidance. If at times things go against your wish, it is for your benefit. For the Master it is to do what he thinks best for you and not what you think best for you. Persevere with love and faith, and you will succeed. Guru Nanak says: "In this path let your foot take a step forward always and never turn your face backwards. Make good in this very life so that there will be no more rebirth." Says Maulvi Rum: "In this path struggle on and on and do not rest even at the last breath."

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Something to Think About

Not Saying but Being

Yamaoka Tesshu, as a young student of Zen, visited one master after another. He called upon Dokuon of Shokoku.

Desiring to show his attainment, he said:

“The mind, Buddha, and sentient beings, after all, do not exist. The true nature of phenomena is emptiness. There is no realization, no delusion, no wisdom, no mediocrity. There is no giving and nothing to be received.”

Dokuon, who was smoking quietly, said nothing. Suddenly he whacked Yamaoka with his bamboo pipe. This made the youth quite angry.

“If nothing exists,” inquired Dokuon, “where did this anger come from?”

Paul Reps, *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*

“I want you to be a true king in reality,” said the Great Master, “not only in theory and assumption. Not only to say, like a pretender, that you are ‘atma’ - eternal, immortal, deathless, all-knower, omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, the changeless, the creator of all, beyond mind and senses – but to be so in reality ...”

“But there is great pleasure in saying ‘I am God, the Lord of all’”, the barrister declared.

“Not in saying, but in being”, corrected the Great Master.

Daryai Lal Kapur, *Call of the Great Master*



Conundrums

When we first approach the path of Sant Mat we are encouraged to read the literature and to ask as many questions as we need in order to satisfy our minds that this is truly the path for us. The Master wants us to be absolutely sure that we want to follow the teachings. He wants us to be completely convinced that we are making the right choice when we apply for initiation because, afterwards, our commitment should be total.

Ideally, once we get initiated, the time for questioning should be over. However, the mind being the mind, we find that, to some degree, we never stop questioning (until we have gone beyond the realm of mind altogether). We come across all sorts of thoughts, theories and ideas that challenge our assumptions. In fact, the longer we follow the path, the more we realize that it is full of conundrums – truths which, though they appear to be in opposition to each other, may actually be complementary, rather like the yin and yang of Chinese philosophy.

Effort, grace and letting go

We are constantly told that we must make the effort to repeat our simran as it is well within our power to do so. But where does our simran come from? Is it really from us or is it his grace, his gift?

Without the Lord's grace, we would not even contemplate sitting in meditation. But we can't leave everything to grace. Time and again we are told that our intentions are important, that we should make the effort to attend to our meditation with sincerity and honesty even if the results are not immediately forthcoming. We are like little ants climbing a huge cliff. We get up a little way, fall off, and start again. Little by little, we work our way up further and further, and even

though we know we will slip, we have to re-apply ourselves over and over again. The paradox is that, the more effort we put in, the more grace we will receive. No attempt at meditation goes unrecorded or is wasted, no matter how small. The Masters assure us that for every step we take towards them, they will take at least ten steps towards us. They are always with us, full of encouragement, whether we are aware of it or not.

Another related conundrum is that whilst we are entreated to make the effort, we are also told to 'let go'. Oh that we could do that! What a luxury it would be to simply have an off switch for the mind. One day, however, we will reach a point where we will stop analyzing ourselves, hand the results of our meditation over to the Master, and simply surrender. It is at this point that the ant will stop slipping and we will achieve our ultimate goal.

Out of darkness comes light, out of weakness, strength.

Although the sun is always shining, we can't always enjoy its light and warmth. Sometimes it is covered by thick clouds so that even the daytime appears dark and cold. Likewise, none of us is permanently happy; we all go through difficult situations, which the saints say we should view as a blessing. These difficult situations are products of previous actions that we ourselves undertook. Whatever form they now take (illness, poverty, animosity or loss), they are debts that stand against us and, like a debtor, we should be happy that the debt is being paid off. As there is no alternative to the operation of karmic law, the only recourse open to us is to reconcile ourselves with what is happening rather than fighting against it. In *The Dawn of Light*, the Great Master writes:

It is difficult to be happy in calamity, but you will find much change if you look at it from the viewpoint just stated [i.e.

karmic theory]. Guru Nanak, a great saint, said: “Misery is medicine and pleasure is disease, because in pleasure the mind scatters and in adversity or misery it contracts.”

In quoting Guru Nanak, the Great Master draws attention to another benefit of pain. By going through difficult situations we can learn more about ourselves and grow from our mistakes. The pain can be transformed into something that is actually good for us – it helps us focus on what is important and so draws us nearer to God. For instance, elsewhere in *The Dawn of Light*, the Great Master states, “The soul that is satisfied in this world does not feel the necessity of joining its Creator.”

When times get really tough we may become aware that the Master is carrying us, protecting us from the full impact of the situation. We go through the motions of life but somehow we feel removed from the situation, as though we are watching a film. It is all going on, but we are not quite part of it. Through his grace, walking on the sword's edge ensures that we become focused on what is truly important, with all the trivia of life fading into the background. At such times, we also begin to realize just how important those hours of meditation have been in enabling us to reach this point.

The more we know, the more we realize we know nothing

It is a truism that on one's deathbed, no one wishes he had spent more time at the office – but there may be some initiates who will wish that they had spent more time doing their meditation. We have heard many stories of people coming towards the end of their life proclaiming, “If only I had known, I wouldn't have wasted a single minute”, indicating that when we get just an iota of mystical knowledge, the things we thought we knew start to melt away. Sadly,

until we actually reach the eye centre, we will not know what it is that we have been missing. Nonetheless, regardless of outcome, our task is to keep making the effort and also to keep our lives in balance – understanding that life is built from the stuff of illusion does not mean that we should not enjoy it and have fun.

Progress happens so gradually that we are not even aware of it, but our attitude and perseverance is very important. If we hold love in our hearts we can't go too far wrong. The stiller we become inside, the more we are able to reflect the all-embracing love flowing from the Master. In the words of the well-known hymn (and through our simran) we slowly begin to “cleanse the chamber of our heart”. We become helpless in his love and leave the small ego-bound ‘self’ behind. After all those youthful years of study, building up our careers, creating a nice home environment and so forth, we come to realize that all comes from him and we are simply his instruments. The more we know, the more we realize that we know nothing.

The first shall be last and the last shall be first

There is no seniority in spirituality. Everybody who has been initiated will one day reach Sach Khand. However, the timing of this will vary according to one's individual karma. Some individuals may come to the path quite late in life and are able to see the Radiant Form of the Master almost immediately, whilst others will have devoted their whole life to spiritual devotion without seemingly achieving the same wealth. As the Great Master states in *The Dawn of Light*:

The revelation time depends on the lightness or heaviness of the past karmas. There are certain souls who do not get it even after twenty years, while there are others to whom it is granted to see

*the form of the Master within on the very first day of initiation.
Rest assured that the revelation will come one day.*

Taking comfort from the Great Master's assurance that all seekers will be awarded their spiritual treasure, we may wish to ponder on another thought. In the eyes of the Lord, it may well be those people who work away quietly in the background, unnoticed by anyone, who are really doing the important work on the inner level.

By having nothing we become everything

What can we give to the Master? What do we have that belongs to us? Guru Nanak, when asked by a king what gift he would like to receive, explained that none of the king's wealth, land, or family was his to give. All the king had to give was his ego. Here we come to our last conundrum. When we finally reach the point of self-realization, acknowledging that all we have is our ego, what is it that we need to do? We must hand over our ego to the Lord, surrendering that which stands between us and him. It is when we have done this that we become one with the Creator and acquire everything. By having nothing we become everything. We can then merge into the ocean and become one with it.



Your Friend or Master is within you, nearer than anything else, and watches you.

Whenever your attention is directed towards the eye centre, He hears you and responds, but His response is missed by you because your attention wavers and runs outwards. If you could hear inside, you would be in tune. I wish you may come up to Him and see Him inside, face to face, instead of merely sensing His presence.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Patient Perseverance

Inspirational Advice from The Great Master

These very thoughts that come and hinder concentration are to be checked. Since our birth here, we have been daily taking photographs of what we have heard, read, or observed, and storing these in our mind. And the mind is so big that even if we place the whole universe in it, it will be found to be bigger and capable of storing any number of universes and still remain bigger. The thoughts that arise are the same photographs that we have been taking so long and preserving with us. They are not, however, endless. They will finish up in time, with the attention finding its focus. Then this cinema show will end.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Desires have abased the soul. When mind desires something and fails to find the object of its desires, it feels pain. Therefore, abandon your desires now and accustom yourself to be resigned to the will of the Master. Mind is a slave to habit and is forcibly led astray by it. Find for yourself what habits are obstacles in the way of truth. Get rid of them by and by, and fill their place with good ones.... But note that mere theory of a thing does not help, unless it is actually put into practice. Mind is very powerful. At the time of deliberation it makes promises, but does not care to fulfil them when the occasion arises. To control the mind is not the work of haste; it requires years of patient perseverance. As long as it does not begin to take pleasure in the internal music, it must fly out to worldly pleasures. Apply your mind with love and keen interest to the spiritual exercises, without any false apprehensions. One day you will get complete control over your mind and senses, and that is a great blessing.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*

It is only when we sit in meditation that we begin to discover the power, the waywardness and the obstinacy of the mind. The mind that has been running wild ever since we came into the wheel of life and death will take time to yield. You are just beginning the fight against it. It is a life-long fight; and the reward is, if one conquers his mind (makes it motionless in the eye centre) he wins the world.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Try to perform repetition in one posture, changing your position as little as possible. The mind does not become still without two hours repetition at a time. If one performs repetition while walking, going on errands and the like, the mind will feel quieter when one sits for repetition.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

The Father is always with you. You live, move and have your being in him. He is always helping you in every kind of task that you perform. The nearer you come to him, the more fully you will feel his presence and realize his help. As love for him increases in you, you will get a deeper and deeper realization of his Radiant Form within yourself. You must not expect spiritual realization all at once. The adepts call this path Sahaj Yoga, that is, a path on which you can walk slowly, and slowly only.... The mind has acquired so much control over the soul that it keeps the soul always entangled in the enjoyment of senses. This is the reason why a person cannot rise above the world all at once. Our Master is all-powerful and certainly one day he will release us from the bondage of mind and senses, through his infinite mercy, provided we practise bhajan and simran to the best of our ability, according to his orders.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *The Dawn of Light*



The Promise

*O Master, I have promised
To serve thee to the end;
Be thou for ever near me,
My Master and my friend:
I shall not fear the battle
If thou art by my side,
Nor wander from the pathway
If thou wilt be my guide.*

*O let me feel thee near me:
The world is ever near;
I see the sights that dazzle,
The tempting sounds I hear;
My foes are ever near me,
Around me and within;
But, Master, draw thou nearer,
And shield my soul from sin.*

*O let me hear thee speaking
In accents clear and still,
Above the storms of passion,
The murmurs of self-will;
O speak to reassure me,
To hasten or control;
O speak, and make me listen,
Thou guardian of my soul.*

*O Master, thou hast promised
To all who follow thee,
That where thou art in glory
There shall thy servant be ...
O guide me, call me, draw me,
Uphold me to the end;
And then at last receive me,
My Saviour and my friend.*

John Bode

The beautiful hymn *The Promise* was one we used to sing when I was at school over forty years ago. It is written by a Christian, John Bode, and continues to be sung in churches even today. I've always been drawn to it because in reflecting a disciple's feelings for his Master, it summarizes our feelings for Baba Ji. So, whilst the hymn was originally addressed to Jesus, from a Sant Mat perspective it can be interpreted as a prayer from a satsangi to his Master.

In the first verse, the disciple pledges to serve his Master "to the end". This is like us at the time of initiation promising the Master that we will practise our meditation for our whole life. This is our way of serving him to the end. In the hymn, the disciple refers to the Master as a "friend" and, quite beautifully, beseeches him for his continual presence and guidance – "Be thou for ever near me" and "be my guide". With the Master by his side, the disciple feels that he will not be afraid of the struggles that life may present or take the wrong course of action. Similarly, upon initiation, as our soul becomes connected with the sound current, and the astral form of the Master is now with us always, we too feel that life holds no fear. Baba Ji makes it clear, however, that the Shabd is present within all of us and therefore, as

long as the Lord is in our heart, initiated or not, none of us need fear anything.

In the second verse, the disciple conveys awareness of his weaknesses and acknowledges that these cannot be overcome without the protection of his Master. He implores the Master to let him feel his presence so that he may not succumb to the temptations of the world. Very succinctly, this verse encapsulates our plight, our awakening, and our need for the Master.

Like the disciple in the hymn, we are beginning to realize that the so-called pleasures of the world are an illusion – transitory, shallow, devoid of substance and meaning. Despite this awareness, most of us continue to let ourselves be drawn by maya. We become engrossed in the thrills and excitement until eventually we end up deflated and miserable as the very same pleasures turn into a source of suffering. We also have the five passions to contend with, referred to as “foes”. Being within us, they are always present and, whilst we may make some progress in trying to overcome them, we will never be rid of them completely until we reach a certain level of spiritual maturity.

In the third verse, the essence of the hymn, the disciple begs the Master to speak to him. Each time we sit in bhajan, we too are begging the Master to speak to us through the sound current. Like the disciple, sometimes we are desperate to hear the sound because we need reassurance that we’re headed in the right direction. We may reach a point in our spiritual journey when we feel as if we’re in a void, a desert, in which the bright lights of the world no longer really interest us, yet neither have we experienced the ecstasy associated with reaching a stage of super-consciousness.

The disciple also continues with the theme of the previous verse. He addresses the Master as the “guardian of my soul” and begs him to “speak, and make me listen”. Masters promise to look after the souls

of all those they have initiated, and so the disciple, anxious about his weaknesses and limited self-control, urges the Master to “make” him listen. This sounds very similar to the requests we make to Baba Ji for grace to enable us to practise meditation. However, Baba Ji will only be in a position to “make” us listen to the sound current if we actually sit down for simran and bhajan.

In the final verse, the disciple refers to the Master as his “Saviour”. Similarly, we are aware that we cannot escape the cycle of birth and death without a living Master. In the hymn, the disciple reminds the Master that he has promised to take all his followers home. So, in this vein, the disciple makes a final plea, urging the Master to offer his guidance and protection until life’s end, when they can be joined together forever.

We don’t need to remind our Master about his promise; he is more anxious to see us home than we are to get there. So, like the disciple, we should pray (through our meditation) that we never forget the Master, that we feel his presence in us and all around us throughout the day. The Master has promised that he will stay by our side for as long as it takes for him to receive us in Sach Khand.



Even before we are able to travel on the inner path, the very association with or company of a mystic makes us feel relaxed and happy. A man with eyes enjoys both the beauty and the fragrance of a flower, but even a blind man can enjoy the fragrance of a flower. Before we make progress on the spiritual path we are all spiritually blind, but even then we can enjoy the spiritual fragrance of the Master. When our inner eye is opened through the technique given to us by the Master at the time of initiation, we too can enjoy the beauty of those spiritual experiences within.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Light on Saint John*

Nothing but You

A long time ago, as a young and raw initiate of Maharaj Charan Singh, I was blessed with the opportunity of a private interview. During the stay at Dera I had been through some youthful highs and lows, at one point dizzy with happiness and at another deep in self-reproach at various failings.

The interview had been eagerly awaited and now, as Hazur kindly indicated the chair beside him, I took a deep breath and asked my carefully prepared question – a question I was sure he would appreciate:

“How can I be a better person?”

I will always remember Maharaj Ji’s casual response:

“Just be a better person.”

We knew, those of us there in that Dera session – just as anyone who spends time with the Master knows – the feel of his tenderness and interest. So it was not so much the brevity of his reply that perplexed me, but the fact that the choice of topic had clearly fallen flat. I registered at once that it was simply not what interested him, that it did not belong there, was usurping the place of something much more important. Yet I didn’t understand what. A little more was said and presently the time was up. I knew things had not gone as I had wished and went back to my room somewhat subdued.

It is only with hindsight that I see how useless the pursuit of virtue is! How time-wasting, how deceptive it is. The wonderful invitation offered by a true Master is not self-improvement but the opportunity to fall in love with the Master – and that involves forgetting the self, whatever its condition. The American poet Hart Crane said:

*Forgetfulness is like a bird whose wings are reconciled,
Outspread and motionless –
A bird that coasts the wind unwearingly.*

Those lines convey something of the still focus of the kind of forgetfulness that is needed. If we can only coast the wind of our thought currents “unwearingly”, holding our attention always upwards toward the eye centre where our Master can be found, then everything else will fall into place quite automatically. In *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*, Maharaj Charan Singh tells a disciple:

If you are in love with the master, you'll automatically be in love with your brothers and sisters. Love for the master will create love for your other fellow human beings because then you'll see the master in every disciple.

And again, in *The Master Answers*:

When love comes in us, all the good qualities of a human being come up, like cream in milk. All that we have to fight for with oneself now in order to be good, to be honest, to behave rightly, to do this or that, will automatically come in us when we feel that devotion within us for the Lord.

Years later, is my mind now “like a bird whose wings are reconciled, outspread and motionless”? No, not yet. But one thing I think I do know. If I'm lucky enough to sit again in the presence of a true master, my own Master's successor, let me know, let me need to know, nothing but him. Let me forget everything except his beauty and peace – and just enjoy that moment. It's far too precious to waste in consideration of anything or anyone else.

The Only News

The only news I know
Is bulletins all day
From Immortality;

The only shows I see –
Tomorrow and Today –
Perchance Eternity –

The Only One I meet
Is God – the Only Street –
Existence – This traversed,

If Other News there be –
Or Admirabler Show –
I'll tell it You.

Emily Dickinson



Maharaj Charan Singh

The Gift of Life

That which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born again.

Bible, John 3: 6-7

The spiritual birth of a human being is the most important event of his entire series of earthly existences. It is the goal towards which he has constantly been progressing, albeit much of the time unconsciously, throughout all his lives in the material world.

The first step in being born anew is initiation by a living perfect Master, at which time the Master connects the soul with the Word, the all-powerful current of spiritual life.

At the time of initiation the seed of the spiritual life is planted in the disciple and, like a material seed, it must and will grow and bring forth fruit. The process is in accordance with natural and spiritual law, and the result is inevitable. Thereafter, as the soul is drawn upward by the power of the audible life stream and rises above the body consciousness, it comes in due time to cosmic awareness and the spiritual birth is brought to a state of ultimate perfection. Initiation means the beginning of a new and higher life, a new and broader outlook, and a new and deeper understanding.

The Masters throughout human history have been the divinely appointed agents of the Supreme Father sent to this planet to give the new birth to those who long for it in right earnest and are ready for it. This they can do because they have free access to the souls of men. Their revivifying spiritual power and love can therefore pierce through outer coverings, and reach and touch the soul within by direct communication between soul and soul.

The power of the Masters to reach the soul is of the utmost importance, for in this way they can contact and bring to light the God-power within ourselves. The Masters can ignore or bypass the mind and exert the spiritualizing power directly on the soul. Thus they gradually develop or liberate a soul force within us of which we were not previously aware, and which in time becomes the dominant factor in our lives.

Over and over again the Masters have referred to the physical birth as a death, because it means that the soul, bright and radiant from God in its essential nature, must once again go down into darkness.

The real birth takes place when the soul is connected with the great luminous reality of the sound current or Holy Spirit by a perfect Master.

Thus, initiation is the first step in the divinely planned process that releases man from the relative death of the physical world and makes it possible for him to awaken spiritually, or be born of the spirit, and then rise up to live the spiritual and infinitely joyous life of the higher realms from which he long ago descended. There is but one final proof that this is true, one supreme authority by which it can be proved beyond dispute. And this is the authority of one's personal experience, one's own first-hand realization that it is a verifiable fact. This realization is made possible through initiation by a perfect Master and by the practice of meditation in which these Masters instruct their disciples.

Yoga and the Bible



Book Review

Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women

EDITED BY JANE HIRSHFIELD

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In *Women in Praise of the Sacred*, Jane Hirshfield, a widely published poet and herself a practitioner of Zen, has brought together an extraordinary collection of poems, hymns, invocations, and prayers by women. Arranged chronologically – beginning with a prayer by a Sumerian priestess from around 2300 BCE and ending with a poem by a 20th century Korean Buddhist nun – this collection gives voice to spiritual longing, wisdom and insight as it has been expressed in widely different cultures.

Throughout human history, and certainly within every cultural and religious tradition represented in this volume, the writings of women are far less known than those of men. Hirshfield has dug deep into the world's spiritual literature to find writings which few readers will have seen before.

Sometimes, the imagery and mode of expression are distinctly feminine. Kassiane, an 8th century Byzantine nun, memorializes Jesus's forgiveness of the sinful woman in a hymn:

*I will wash your feet with kisses,
dry them with my hair, feet that Eve once heard
at dusk in paradise then hid in fear.*

The Taoist sage Cui Shaoxuan urges the reader not to waste the precious opportunity of life:

*Black hair and red cheeks: for how long?
One moment, and the silver streaks run through.
Open the blinds: the first apricot blossoms have opened –
Hurry! The spring days are now!*

Usually, however, these descriptions of spiritual reality do not use gender-specific language or images. Verses by Tibetan Buddhist women (circa 8th-11th centuries) struggle to convey how reality lies beyond the reach of mind and language:

*Kye Ho! Wonderful!
You may say "existence," but you can't grasp it!
You may say "nonexistence," but many things appear!
It is beyond the sky of "existence" and "nonexistence" –
I know it but cannot point to it!*

Similarly, Mechtilde of Magdeburg, from a group of medieval European women Christian mystics called Beguines, confesses her inability to describe a mystical truth she had realized:

*Of all that God has shown me
I can speak just the smallest word,
Not more than a honey bee
Takes on his foot
From an overspilling jar.*

Another Beguine, Hadewich, explains where to seek mystic realization:

*You who want knowledge,
seek the Oneness within
There you will find
the clear mirror already waiting.*

In some cases, Hirshfield offers verses from the best-known women mystics from a given spiritual tradition, such as Rabi`a from the Sufi tradition and Mira Bai from the Bhakti tradition. But her research has also unearthed some previously unknown gems. Even wide readers in Sufi literature may never have heard of Bibi Hayati, a 19th century Persian Sufi. And those who are drawn to the writings of the Bhakti poets may

not know of Lal Ded, a Shaivite mystical devotee of the Path of Oneness, who writes:

*I searched for my Self
Until I grew weary,
But no one, I know now,
Reaches the hidden knowledge
By means of effort.
Then, absorbed in “Thou art This,”
I found the place of Wine.
There all the jars are filled,
But no one is left to drink.*

In collecting women’s writings praising the sacred, Hirshfield’s understanding of “the sacred” is broad enough to encompass vastly different cultural expressions. She has included an invocation by Uvavnu, an Iglulik Eskimo woman shaman, to the great sea, an Osage women’s initiation song, two women’s prayers from the Kwakiutl people of British Columbia, Canada, and other Native American sources. In a few cases of anonymous writings, Hirshfield has made an educated guess that the writers could have been women, based on the role of women within that culture or on similar writings known to be by women from that culture.

Between the covers of this volume, then, a striking variety of voices speak out: from the Sumerian Enheduanna, who intones a solemn hymn to Inanna, moon goddess, “Lady of all powers, in whom light appears, Radiant one, Beloved of Heaven and Earth, tiara-crowned... My lady you are the guardian of all greatness” – to Izumi Shikibu, the 11th century Japanese Zen Buddhist nun, who quietly observes the moon (a symbol in Zen poetry of the enlightened mind):

*Watching the moon
at midnight,
solitary, mid-sky,
I knew myself completely,
no part left out.*

The poets of the 19th and 20th centuries in this collection include such diverse writers as the British Emily Bronte and Christina Rossetti, the Finnish Edith Sodergran, the German Nelly Sachs, the Russian Marina Tsataeva, and the American Emily Dickinson. Verses from Emily Dickinson show her mystical insight:

*The Infinite a sudden Guest
Has been assumed to be –
But how can that stupendous come
Which never went away?*

The translators for each poem included in this volume are noted. Many of the selections were translated by Hirshfield herself, either from the original text or working from other English translations in multiple scholarly sources. An appendix titled “For Further Reading” gives the sources for each of the selections and points the reader toward books where more writings by each author may be found.



