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# Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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## **Spiritual Link**

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# The Day Is Short

*Foolish wayfarer, why do you delay?  
Take heed, the day is short,  
And long is your way.*

*The sun in the east has lit the torch;  
Now is the time for your homeward march.  
Move swiftly, reach home  
Before the sun turns pale;  
The hours are fleeting and long is your trail.  
Treasure the chance, don't falter or lose heart;  
Be free of all cares and make a start.*

*Reach home, and from fear and doubt be free;  
Loitering midway, you will come to misery.  
Foolish wayfarer, why do you delay?  
Long is the way and soon will end the day.*

*O kind Lord of Mira, Thou in Thy grace  
Give her a path short and easy to pace.*

*Mira The Divine Lover*



# The True Alchemy of Life

Alchemy has always been perceived as a rather archaic science whose practitioners were in search of the fabled Philosopher's Stone. Alchemists believed that the stone could convert base metal into gold and thereby bestow on them the elixir of immortality. Many who sought riches and fame delved into this so-called science, only to be defeated by the writings of ancient alchemists, probably because they did not understand that true alchemy had little to do with either base metals or gold.

These pseudo-scientists laboured in dingy laboratories, mixing arcane substances in a mimicry of modern chemistry, sometimes with unexpected results as they inadvertently created combustible products which promptly exploded. Supposed ancient texts were traded at a great price, claiming to contain the secrets of famous alchemists of bygone years, who allegedly succeeded in producing gold in vast quantities and lived for much longer than the normally allotted span of life.

However, there are no known, validated cases where anyone was able to demonstrate the ability to change lead into gold or live beyond the normal span of years. So one has to ask: was there ever any truth in these stories of the Philosopher's Stone? Was all of this intended to be understood literally? Or was it really an ancient code, by means of which the true alchemists communicated a much higher and more sublime method of achieving riches and immortality of a completely different kind?

Belief in alchemy possibly arose out of a misunderstanding of spiritual instructions meant to guide practitioners on the path to spiritual realization. It might have been necessary to couch these instructions in arcane language because religious authorities of the time disapproved of deviations from orthodox beliefs and persecuted those who engaged in 'heretical' practices.

So the transmutation of base metal into gold is a symbolic expression. Metaphorically speaking then, the condition of the soul has become degraded into the base metal of worldliness. It has debased itself by association with the mind and senses and has completely lost itself in sensual indulgence.

Alchemy in its true form describes the process by which the true essence is sublimated from the gross, and then transmuted into the finest gold. So what is the gold in this case? It refers to the condition and status of the liberated soul. Soami Ji says:

*Satsang is like the Philosopher's Stone. Just as iron is changed into gold by mere contact with it, those who sincerely follow satsang are turned into the gold of immortal life.*

*Sar Bachan Prose*

Here Soami Ji explains that being in the presence of the living Master is the catalyst that initiates change in us, but it is by following his teachings that the inner transformation, or alchemy, takes place. As Baba Ji has said, the true Master has to be contacted within. The body Master, as Baba Ji puts it, is there to convey the teachings. When we scrupulously follow those teachings, we rise up to meet the Shabd Master, who is our true Master and guide.

But by what method do we achieve the profound spiritual changes that we so desire? We need to understand that the problem initially arose from the investment of our entire attention into the phenomena of the material world and our obsession with enjoying the pleasures of the senses. This in turn led to us getting so attached to the faces, places and things of the world that we refused to be parted from them.

This, in addition to the inevitable karmas that we accumulated in the pursuit of these pleasures, resulted in binding us just as much as if we had been thrown into prison, because it is simply not possible to escape the consequences of our past actions, no matter how hard we may try.

The mystics have all said that our karmas tie us down more effectively than prison cells or chains, and until every last one of them has been accounted for, we can make little progress.

For this reason our Master advises us to live in such a way that we will incur no further karmic debt, because it would be extremely foolish to attempt to diminish our karmic account while continuing to incur new debts. The essence of the method for deleting our karmas is to raise our attention to the eye centre and contact the Shabd resounding there. By living according to the Master's instructions, his grace, and meditation on

the Shabd, our outstanding karmic debts are eliminated, thus clearing the way for the soul's progress.

When one makes a little progress on the path, the innate qualities of the soul start to rise to the surface. We begin to experience the stirrings of the soul and the qualities of compassion, devotion and love start to develop in us. Subtly at first, but over time, and with continued practice these sublime qualities develop more and more, to the point where, instead of being obsessed and entangled with the world as we were before, we now become obsessed with our Master, and he alone becomes the focus of our attention and the centre of our life.

We should appreciate the enormity of the great blessings that the Lord has showered on us. Were it not for his grace we would be no different from the billions of humans who do not realize what a wonderful gift this human form represents, and who squander this opportunity in the pursuit of sensual pleasures, wealth and possessions. Instead of striving for eternal bliss they opt for the short-lived pleasures of the world, which all come with a secret price tag that will eventually have to be paid in the form of additional karmas added to the massive amount already standing against their account.

If we consider our situation and we look at how much we have been given, we have much to be grateful for. Before we came to our Master, we could say that we fell into the category of base metal, because our attention, our values and our ambitions all centred on worldly things. We believed that this world was all there was and therefore there was no point in looking elsewhere.

However, since being initiated by our Master, we have found ourselves in possession of a method that is probably what the alchemists of old were talking about. It is the process of contemplating on the divine power within that invokes the catalyst referred to as the Stone of Knowledge or the Philosopher's Stone. It is this method and process that can transmute the base metal of our previously worldly self into the golden reality of a spiritually realized being. This takes place when we finally clear our karmic debts, free ourselves from all attachments and move beyond mind and Maya.

This process culminates finally and gloriously when the soul enters the realm of Sach Khand, there to merge permanently and blissfully into the Lord himself.

So we have no need to research ancient alchemical works, nor attempt to follow any arcane formulas to produce the Philosopher's Stone. We have no need for worldly gold. Our need, indeed our calling, is far higher. When the Lord himself has called us to return to his golden domain, what power can stay our progress homeward? When the Master has bestowed on us the great gift of Nam, what need have we for worldly formulas for acquiring material wealth?

We walk alongside one who has himself completed this journey, and who is far beyond all worldly kings or emperors. All that remains for us is to keep walking, conscious at every moment that we are in the presence of the Divine, and that the Lord himself is waiting for us at the end of this path, arms outstretched in joyous anticipation of our final reunion.

In conclusion, Soami Ji has this to say:

*I am just a lump of iron  
and you, Radha Soami, are the Philosopher's Stone;  
purified by your touch I have reached my true home.*

*Sar Bachan Poetry*



# Nothing Else Matters

What should be our top priority in life? The following story may illustrate the problem of not being clear on this subject.

A flight, which appeared to be normal, was approaching its airport. However, at that moment the indicator light for the landing gear failed to light up. This was a problem, which could have been disastrous. The crew decided to check if the light was working correctly but, in doing so, the automatic pilot was accidentally switched off, which they did not notice. The plane started losing height and crashed.

The plane crashed because the crew lost sight of their priority. They were distracted by what was urgent and forgot what was important.

So, what is our true priority in life? All the Masters tell us: meditation.

We often spend our lives waiting for the right or perfect time to attend to our spirituality. Waiting for the motivation to meditate. This is like trying to fix the whole world so that we can be at peace to start meditating. But that is not going to happen. We need clarity rather than certainty in life.

Another tendency is to allow our obligations and duties to consume so much time that we neglect our priority. We should never assume that we have plenty of time left and thus delay becoming serious about our spiritual practice. Our time of death is uncertain and could happen sooner than we expect.

We might also find ourselves constantly stressed about our own self-importance. How will our personal world survive without us? However, nothing stops life from moving on. We should not become so involved in day-to-day duties that we become exhausted and are therefore unable to progress towards our spiritual goals.

All the Masters have emphasized the need for meditation above all other considerations. Every letter that a disciple receives from a Master always stresses the importance of attending to meditation daily. Meditation has to be our top priority. Meditation is the most important thing a human being can do. Without it we will continue to be part of the cycle of birth and death.



When life throws challenges at us that feel unbearable, we may not be able to meditate for the allotted meditation time, but we should always do our best. Even doing ten minutes is to our credit. So, never feel distressed by these phases. Continue to sit for meditation, placing firm faith in the Master, knowing we will succeed. He tells us that if we could not do it he would not have initiated us. Great Master tells us in *Spiritual Gems*: “The soul of every true follower is progressing internally even when he is not aware of the progress.”

Still we often feel discouraged because it feels that after so many hours and – so many years – of meditation we’ve achieved nothing. That is what our mind tells us. A trick of the mind is also to complain about doing two and half hours of meditation a day. But the Master has enjoined us to challenge the mind, to tell it that we have wasted enough time in our lives on frivolity, and now is the time to utilize this precious human form for its most important purpose, which is simran and bhajan.

Baba Ji tells us to have a positive attitude. So, what impact does our attitude have on our spiritual life?

If we believe that it is not possible to succeed in meditation then that is how it will unfold. When we sit in meditation we are training ourselves to operate from a perspective of acceptance, letting go, becoming free, and also to have an attitude of obedience to a power that is much greater than ourselves.

This world, if met with this positive attitude, can become a source of joy, inspiring us to see the divine will in everything around us, and to worship the Lord through his creation. Focusing our effort towards doing meditation is of utmost importance. This keeps us in balance and unaffected by the storms that are an inescapable part of life.

Meditation transforms us, causing changes that produce a total transformation of our lives. So we must never give up trying. We should adopt a positive yet practical approach to constantly renew our commitment to sit daily for meditation. If we are persistent, then gradually we can increase the meditation time to eventually doing two and a half hours daily, as our Master has asked us to do. Maharaj Jagat Singh says:

*The aim should always be to increase these periods gradually so that you can ultimately sit for two and a half hours at a stretch. There should be no hurry in doing so. Rather, the progress should be consolidated.*

*Science of the Soul*

We are asked to put concentrated effort into meditation so that we can lift our consciousness beyond mere belief and the concepts we hold. We might say the Master is in control. However, it is only when we go within and hear the Shabd Dhun (inner sound) and meet the Radiant Form of the Master, that we will know and experience that he is in control of everything.

The emphasis here is on practice and experience, to know experientially what we believe conceptually. We can believe we are generous, but unless we act on that concept and do something that displays generosity, it is still a concept. Until concepts become experience, all there is is speculation, and this experience only comes with the practice of meditation.

This life we live is not about us. It is about God experiencing himself through us. God is more interested in our potential than our mistakes. He wants us to recognize who we truly are, which will enable us to move from concepts to experience and true knowledge.

Ego is the veil or barrier preventing us from experiencing true love and oneness with God. Ego causes duality because it encourages the mind to think in terms of 'my' and 'mine': I am one thing and the world is something else. Because of the ego, we are ignorant of who we truly are. We are the drop, which has to lose its separateness and become part of the ocean. The ego is the mask of the personality that covers the true self. Until we remove the mask of the ego, the deceptive wall of duality between Shabd and our true self cannot dissolve.

Some mystics have said that union is achieved through the stillness of thought waves. This is achieved by training the mind in simran, which replaces and controls thoughts. As our awareness of Shabd expands, ego then occupies its proper place, soul gains control, and once this is accomplished we are drawn by the magnetic pull of the Sound.

Some of us might be afraid to lose our sense of self by merging into the ocean of consciousness. In fact, we will become what we truly are, which is pure consciousness, perfect happiness, and limitless love. Why remain satisfied with this dark world, separated from our true essence, when our possibilities are infinite?

To forget oneself is the fundamental principle of love. When all the desires of a lover narrow down to unconditionally accepting the will of the Beloved, then there is no self, no ego. There is no longer duality. Oneness is attained.

The Masters tell us that we just have to make a little effort and reach the eye centre. Then the Lord will do the rest. He will fill us with longing and pangs of separation, and will shower his grace on us. Thus, the soul will have no choice but to be pulled by the Lord.

So, the magic word is meditation. There is no shortcut. Meditation creates the love, meditation invokes his grace, meditation will remove the barrier of ego. Ultimately it is in meditation that we will merge with our Beloved.

As Maharaj Charan Singh says:

*Just change your way of life according to the teachings and attend to meditation. That is all that is required. From meditation love will come, submission will come, humility will come. Everything will come.*

*Die to Live*



# Aiming for the Ultimate

When we apply for initiation from the living Master of our time, do we ever realize what we're asking for – the enormity of this request? Of course not! It's only much later that we even get an inkling of the significance of initiation.

The truth is that it is the turning point in our many, many lives, from the dawn of creation to now. We are asking the Master to set our feet on the path back to God. After so many lives we are begging him to rescue us from our imprisonment in the creation and make us one again with him.

Once initiated, we undertake something huge, striving for the highest goal anybody could even think of. We work, ever so slowly, to transform ourselves to become worthy of God-realization.

Mind you, right at the start this was probably not our conscious intention. And in truth, it wasn't even our choice. For some inexplicable reason we were rounded up, infected with a strange dissatisfaction with our ordinary lives and made to search for something better. And then we were brought to a point where we stumbled upon this path and were initiated by the bewildering, incredible and beautiful Master who has accepted us as his own.

So now we're faced with the uncomfortable truth that our goal for this life is something far beyond us. By ourselves we just can't do it, and it'll be up to our Master to see that we get to where he wants us to be.

But we've also been given an important part to play in the process. We have to live the life of a good satsangi and we have to meditate. And in time a slow, slow inner transformation will bring us to the point where we will indeed become fit to merge back into the Lord.

But this is a joint venture in which he is playing by far the bigger part. We can't see what's happening, and the part we're playing is probably ridiculously small. Considering our ignorance of the process, we just have to do what our Master tells us to do. And keep on doing it.

Perhaps we can compare ourselves to a blindfolded ox pushing the wheel of an old-fashioned oil press. We don't have to understand the process, we don't need to know anything about making olive oil. Day after day all we have to do is plod on.

So, what are the qualities needed for this patient old ox? Obedience, humility, acceptance, and submission. The very qualities a devoted disciple needs to please his Master.

But just watch the ego when we list these qualities. It'll probably rear up like an angry snake at the very thought of being obedient, accepting, humble, and submissive. Such weak and pathetic qualities. The mighty ego is none of these things! But that is what we will become, because of our meditation.

In all our Sant Mat literature there may be no more beautiful passage than the Great Master's prayer. And these are the very things he mentions:

*My Lord! I am ignorant. I do not know what to ask of you. Give me that which you think best for me. And give me the strength and wisdom to be happy about what you deem fit to give me and about how and where you keep me. I have no virtues, no devotion. My actions are all dark and sinful. I possess no merits and my mind has thoroughly crushed me. For a sinner like me, O Lord, there is no refuge but thy blessed feet. Please take me under thy shelter. I want nothing more. Make me thy slave, that I mayest be thine and thou mayest be mine.*

As quoted in *Call of the Great Master*

Acceptance, humility, obedience, submission – they all shine through Great Master's prayer. And because of our meditation these will become our qualities – because the Lord, through the Master, wants us to come back. And he's doing everything he can to make that happen. But we also have to work with him. And ask for nothing more than his grace to meditate every day without expectations.

We read this in *Divine Light*:

*Do not mind whether you see any light within or not, or whether the sound is audible. You simply do your duty and leave the results to the Master.... He alone knows what is good for us and when it should be given. He will pay in abundance. Have faith in Him.*

He will give us results in our meditation when he thinks we're ready. But in the meantime, he's working on us, transforming us into something

higher and finer. We can't see it, of course, but that doesn't mean it's not happening.

Still, we sometimes wonder whether our meditation is worth anything. What makes us keep trying to meditate, even though there isn't the slightest evidence we're achieving anything? The truth is: we have a need to meditate.

Shams-i-Tabriz, the Master of the Persian poet Rumi, spoke a lot about this need – this deep-seated and powerful yearning inside us that drives us to look for a way to get back to our source. Shams recognizes this need as a deep desire for God or for the inner Beloved, a quality that distinguishes those who seek God from those who are content to stay in this world.

Along with this need, there's an understanding of one's own helplessness and inadequacy to find the one we are seeking, which brings a restlessness and a feeling of not belonging in this world. It also reflects a deeply felt humility as we beg the Master and God for help to find what our heart is yearning for.

But of course, there has to be much change in us before we can become one with our Beloved. A great deal of our transformation has to start with the mind – turning the attention inward through meditation, and training the mind itself to leave its attraction to the senses and look instead for higher pleasures. This is how Hazur Maharaj Ji defines meditation:

*Meditation means that we are training our mind to go inward and upward. We are creating a tendency in the mind to go inward and upward, withdrawing it from outside and bringing it back to the eye centre.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*

This process can't be rushed. By its very nature it must be slow because we can't easily change the nature of the mind. Great Master has told us this is a lifelong struggle. So, we can see why the path is long – why a certain amount of struggle, probably a great deal of struggle is inevitable.

And there's even more to it than reining in the mind. Much of the invisible work of our meditation is detaching us from the creation. It's principally our attachments that keep bringing us back into the creation one life after another. Maharaj Ji told us that when we meditate we are automatically becoming detached. He said:

*It is our attachment to the creation which brings us back. You see, even if you have no progress within, but you are not attached to anything in this creation, nobody can bring you back here. If, on the other hand, you have a certain amount of progress to your credit within, but you are attached to something in this creation, you may have to come back to clear that attachment.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*

What a prospect: to finally get release from this endless wheel of birth and death in the creation! But we often feel daunted by the part that we have to play to achieve it – the seemingly endless struggle that lies ahead of us.

However, let's never imagine our Master doesn't understand how difficult this task is for us. He knows all our failings and our defects, and he loves us anyway. And he promises us that we will succeed. In this beautiful letter written by the Great Master to one of his disciples he says:

*I am well aware that you have struggles.... But you can do it. If you have full confidence in the inner Master, he will always help you. And often when you find the difficulties greatest and the hour darkest, the light will appear and you will see that you are free. Let nothing discourage you. This is no light proposition, but your getting Nam means more than if you had inherited a million dollars, or many millions. You are one of the lucky sons of Sat Purush, and he has chosen you to get Nam and go with the Master to Sach Khand. You must reach there. Nothing can prevent you. But you can hasten the progress or retard it, as you like.*

*Spiritual Gems*



# Unending Love

On this path of Sant Mat there are various words and concepts that present us with some difficulties – precisely because they are just that: concepts. Until concepts turn into direct personal experiences, they may be hard to fully grasp and accept.

For example, what can we make of words such as eternal, unchanging, and undying? Every single thing in the material world we inhabit is subject to change, decay and death. The mightiest mountains are eroding and changing constantly. Species of plants, birds, insects, fish and animals become extinct. Every human being we know will die, including ourselves. So how can we possibly relate to, and understand the words eternal, undying, and unchanging?

If we are honest with ourselves, we will realize we can't truly relate to them at all. It's ironic that with our limited mind, and our limited understanding of these words, we find ourselves in the midst of an eternal and undying situation. It is also the greatest love story ever told.

So what is it all about? How did we wind up in this fantasy-like scenario, and how can we absorb or understand its immensity? Obviously we cannot apply our own answers and explanations to this extraordinary state of affairs. Therefore let us look beyond the limitation of human words and experiences, to those offered by people who have reached higher states of awareness. True Masters and mystics are the only people we can turn to for clarity, because they are the very people who have introduced us to these concepts and assured us of our success on our spiritual journey.

The mystics tell us that this story of love begins with God. They tell us that it involves something called the Shabd, and that through the love of a true, living Master, our souls have been gathered into an embrace of eternal love and been promised a release from this world of duality and change. It is a story so positive and optimistic that it is quite hard for our jaded minds to grasp. And it is a love story so vast that the mind fails to grasp more than the tiniest speck of it. But that speck should have us shouting with joy and gratitude.



God, the mystics tell us, is indeed the origin of our love story, as he is the origin of everything, both seen and unseen. In the words of Guru Nanak:

*The creator of all is One, the only One.  
True is his name. He is the doer of everything.  
He is without fear and without enmity.  
His form is immortal. He is unborn and self-illuminated.  
He is realized by the Guru's Grace.*

As quoted in *Basic Principles of Sant Mat*, Vol. I

We are used to the idea of things being created. Creating is not just a human ability either. Animals, birds, insects, and fish are all capable of creating things. However, the concepts of 'unborn' and 'self-illuminated' are difficult to wrap our intellect around. Therefore the Masters say we must go beyond our intellect and strive for a deeper understanding – something other than an intellectual idea of who and what God is. Guru Nanak also tells us that God is immortal. He is undying, never-ending, and unchanging. He is also love. And if he is immortal, then his love is immortal, unchanging, and never-ending.

This entire creation is a manifestation of love, and love sustains us all. We are all intimately and intrinsically a part of this love story. God's love poured out and willed us into being. We are his children.

At the centre of every living thing is a spark of God's love, which we call our soul. The soul is of God, just as the drop is of the ocean. And, just as the drop embodies the essence of the ocean, so too, the soul embodies the essence of God; namely love and immortality.

We are drawn to love as a nail to a magnet. But, as humans, we tend to seek love from friends, family, partners and even pets! This is the soul's longing to return to its source. However, no earthly love can satisfy the yearning of the soul for its home.

Does that mean our soul's love story is doomed to an unhappy conclusion? No, not at all. There are two other crucial factors in this love story: the Shabd and the true living Master. They are both manifestations of the Lord's love and ensure that this story ends in a triumphant reunion of the little drop of soul with the boundless ocean of love.

The Shabd is God's creative and sustaining power, an immortal unchanging current of love. It is actually God himself in an active and dynamic form. Great Master tells us:

*All else in this world is changeable, and changes continually, but not this Sound Current. It is an emanation from, or wave of, the Great Source of all, the Supreme Creator, by whatever name you wish to speak of Him. Each individual is a spark or a drop of that same Infinite Source.*

*Glimpses of the Great Master*

The question is: can we find our way back to our source on our own, having identified the cause of our soul's yearning? The mystics tell us we cannot. We need an intermediary, a true living Master. And it is at this point in the love story that the real miracle of God's love unfolds, when such a Master enters the life of a seeker.

Who and what is the true living Master whom we are told can take us back to our home in Sach Khand? Hazur Maharaj Ji said:

*The saints and mystics are waves of the ocean of the true Shabd. They come into the world, bear witness to the Shabd and preach the Name. Then they take us with them and merge back into the ocean of the Name.*

*Spiritual Discourses, Vol. II*

The mystics tell us that being accepted, claimed, and initiated by a true Master has always been in the destiny of certain souls. As we read in *Basic Principles of Sant Mat*, Vol. I, "They alone find the perfect Guru in this dark age of Kali Yuga upon whose foreheads such pre-ordained destiny is inscribed." Maharaj Charan Singh is quoted in the book *Seva* as saying this about the life-changing gift of initiation:

*This initiation is not just some ceremony. The Lord has made you his own. He has chosen you for eternal liberation and wishes you to come back to him.*

Initiation is not the end of our love story, though. We have a part to play that revolves around three main words: love, obedience and discipline. Our soul, being immortal, has been in this creation for countless ages, reincarnating through 8,400,000 species, and every action

we perform has consequences. So it is in our soul's interest to live as a good human being.

Our part is to show our love for the Master by complete obedience to him in thought, word, and deed. And it is discipline that is required in order to reach our goal of focused meditation as we bring our attention to the eye centre. This discipline is not constrictive, but rather gives us security and guarantees us ultimate freedom.

Meditation is our act of love, the call for his grace, which will help our love grow. The Master is waiting at the eye centre in his radiant Shabd form, ready to take us to our final destination, our source, Sach Khand. Great Master put it this way:

*As the river flows on for ever, regardless of the ways of men, so flows the love of God. Be as constant in your devotion to the Master as the river is in its course, and his love will carry you to that Supreme Ocean as surely as the river flows to the open sea.*

*Glimpses of the Great Master*



# We Are Energy

There is a fundamental question that needs to be asked in order for us to have any idea of how to proceed with our lives. On this question hinges the entire philosophy of anyone who aspires to something more than the ordinary and the mundane.

The question is: What is life?

For example, if we made a robot, and gave it a computer brain with artificial intelligence that was even more capable than a human brain, would it be considered alive? The answer is an emphatic 'no'.

If we look at all the things that we consider alive, like plants, animals, birds and humans, do we find any common factor that we can say constitutes a definition of life? To the casual observer there may be no obvious commonality. The bodies we see are all substantially different and their capabilities and fields of activity are also quite different.

In fact the key element that defines something as alive does not originate in this world at all. We have to look elsewhere for it. It is called soul. This soul is often referred to as a drop from the divine ocean. It is, in fact, identical in nature to that of the Lord but has become degraded in its association with mind and matter.

Actually, the reality behind everything in the universe is an endless energy field that is the Lord in his dynamic form, and he is absolutely aware of everything that happens in his domain, and is in absolute control. There is no second power at all – everything is in his hands.

A clue to this astounding reality was put forward in a mathematical formula by Albert Einstein. His famous, though much misunderstood formula  $E=mc^2$  provides a direct relationship between matter (mass) and energy. And the formula goes both ways: if matter can be converted to energy, then energy can also become matter. Similarly, on a significantly higher level, that pure energy which we call divine can, and does, devolve into gross matter. This is how the creation was made.

However, it is not possible to experience this reality in the realm of the material universe. Only within ourselves lies the means by which we can do this. We ourselves originated in, and came from, that pure light but we became so entranced by the dance of the material creation that we

identified with it and started to believe that we are, in fact, this physical body and have become tied to its beginning and its end. So average human beings live in terror of death because they see it as being the end.

In truth though, both this body and the entire physical creation do not actually exist independently – it is all a display of energy devolving into matter and then returning to its natural state. Great Master, in *Spiritual Gems* says:

*From Sach Khand, the whole creation looks like bubbles forming and disappearing in the spiritual ocean.*

What makes it an illusion is that all of this is taking place in one dimension – that of time. Time is another name for Kal, the ruler of all that takes shape and form in the realms governed by time. Only when we rise to the level where time no longer exists can we see the illusion for what it truly is.

Now this is all very well in theory, but we find ourselves in a situation where we are in what appears to be a solid and real universe, in a solid and real body, so how do we get past that?

Knowing things intellectually and actually realizing them are obviously not the same thing, and just knowing about something is not particularly useful. So how do we proceed if we want to be more than this limited mind/body combination? How do we reach a point where we can actually see the illusion for what it is, and in so doing, realize the truth about our real selves?

As souls wandering in the shadow world of the material, and separated from the regions of light and pure energy, we are truly lost. We have no idea about those regions and only know the trials and tribulations of the wheel of coming and going in this world. Ground under the weight of our accumulated karmas, we are helpless to escape the bonds of our condition and remain ignorant of any solution.

In this state of misery, the heartsore soul cries out for help, to be rescued from this impossible predicament. As mentioned earlier, everything exists within the Lord's domain as manifestations of his divine light, so he immediately registers the cry of the soul. All the souls in creation are his and are there as a function of his will. So, when he

sees a soul reach that point where it cries out in distress, he immediately responds by sending his messenger of light.

It is the advent of the light-bearer into our lives that is the turning point in our otherwise tragic story. When he comes to us, he takes us by the hand and claims us for his own. From that moment onwards we are never alone – he accompanies us every step of our way. He guides us on the path that leads us back to the levels of light where we truly belong.

So the true life can be experienced only within. And this life may be accessed by following the instructions of our Master. The essence of his teachings is that we are to raise our attention to the eye centre and contact the Shabd resounding there. By Shabd practice alone will all our outstanding karmic debts be eliminated, thus clearing the way for us to progress into the upper spiritual regions, finally to merge in our creator and experience the bliss of eternal life, one with the One.



# Stillness, Quietness, and Listening

For millions of lifetimes, we have given free rein to our mind. In all this time it has been leading us away from the eye centre with the distractions and pleasures of the world. When we come onto the spiritual path of meditation, we are leading this untamed, pleasure-seeking mind in a new direction, not of its choosing, and it puts up a fight. When we close our eyes and focus on simran at the eye centre, mind does everything in its power to distract and entice us. We have taken on a powerful adversary. Without the Master's constant watch over us, we could not hope to win the fight with the mind.

So, how can we pull the tyrannical mind into this new direction?

In the Bible it is written: "Be still and know that I am God."

The mystics explain that there is no 'I' separate from God. There is no distance between who we truly are and God. There is nothing to achieve in terms of a goal. When we become perfectly still, we will know; we will realize that we are God. When the mind is still, our soul will slip through the eye of the needle – the eye centre, and we will realize that we are God already.

Maharaj Sawan Singh describes this process of bringing our attention inside during meditation.

*Just as a man, weary with the day's work, resorts to his home to take rest, so we habituate our soul, on being tired with worldly work, to take rest in the holy sound. The attention has to be brought inside, and when it likes to rest there, like the wanderer coming home, it will find peace within.*

*Spiritual Gems*

When the mind rebels, as it will, we keep returning it to simran. This is the start of our spiritual journey, and this stage requires the vigilance and courage of a warrior. But the Master assures us he is always with us. He is there, even when we don't yet have the inner focus to see him.

Spiritual Masters make us aware that we are spiritual beings tied to a mind and body. That mind is knotted together with our soul at our spiritual eye centre, located in the forehead. From the eye centre our attention continuously spreads downwards and outwards into the material creation; and it is this mind – dragging our hostage soul along with it – that is

attracted by the five senses, absorbing a never-ending stream of impressions from them. These sense impressions, the Masters explain to us, form a thick covering or layer of spiritual darkness over the brilliant light of our soul.

The saints don't simply point out our soul's predicament, they show us an actual way to escape our imprisonment. If the senses control the mind and the mind in turn controls the soul then, the saints explain, we must reverse this situation for the soul to regain its freedom.

Once we recognize the need to regain control of our mind, the first step is to take responsibility for every one of our thoughts and actions. Kal, the universal mind, is committed to keeping the soul distracted, so we do not even realize we are imprisoned within his realm of the physical and mental regions. Once we do become aware of this, we must be equally committed to breaking free from this prison of distractions.

Innumerable are the ways we allow ourselves to remain enslaved and distracted. We are conditioned into well-worn pathways of excessive consumption, hobbies, attachments, relationships, name and fame... the list goes on. Whether our metaphorical chains are forged of iron or the finest gold, they serve equally well to keep us imprisoned.

The mind is a tool given to the soul to enable it to function on the physical and mental planes. When controlled by the soul and used as a tool, it's an excellent and helpful servant. When the mind usurps power and controls the soul, it becomes a ruthless master. We become addicted and enslaved by the distractions.

A Canadian physician who works with addiction, Gabor Maté, defines addiction as any repeated activity engaged in despite the certainty that it harms oneself or others. In his book *Scattered Minds* he says:

*All addictions are anaesthetics. They separate us from the distress in our consciousness. We throw off our familiar and tired consciousness to assume another mind state we find more comfortable, at least temporarily. Desperate to be out of our mind and unaware, we surrender to the addiction, to be lulled into a waking sleep.*

So, whether it's shopping, television, relationships, mobile phones or cocaine, we need to be aware of the mind's need to engage in self-soothing activities. Otherwise, as Maté says, we can be lulled into a waking sleep.



Mystics come to awaken us from this sleep, to remind us that we are spiritual beings lost in the downward and outward pull of the mind, driven by desires and conditioning. They come to show us a path, a method to regain mastery of our mind and senses, to regain our long-lost access to our third eye – the centre referred to in the Bible where it says: “If thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light.”

Explaining the profound significance of the third eye, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

*The third eye is the seat of the mind and soul. This is the pivotal point that holds the mystery of life. ... From here every minute the mind wanders out. It does not sit still at this spot even for a moment. Its activities are legion. The ageless secret, the ancient wisdom, the path of the saints lies in withdrawing the attention back to this point.*

As quoted in *Living Meditation*

Meditation creates a point of balance in our life. It prevents us from swinging wildly between our worldly lives and our spiritual aspirations. This, then, becomes our choice: do we prioritize regular meditation or the thousand and one addictions of daily life? Do we choose the stillness of simran or the noise of the mind? In our lives, our actions reflect our choices.

At each step on this path of merging the soul back with the Shabd, the disciple requires the help and inspiration of a living spiritual Master who is the conscious embodiment of these age-old teachings. He teaches by the example of his own life.

Because we have been entrapped by the illusions of the mind for lifetimes, we cannot depend on this limited tool to recognize a true Master.

The Masters tell us that, in reality, we don't find him, he finds us. Hazur likened our situation to that of a small child who has let go of her father's hand in a bazaar. Being so young, she doesn't know her father's full name or his address. Her cries, however, bring the right person, someone who can find her parents and bring her back to them. He says:

*What else can the child do who is lost in this creation, who has lost his Father, except cry? ... If this creation doesn't entertain us and only the cries for the Father are heard, then he pulls us to his level.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*

The real miracle the Masters perform for us is to turn our whole mindset and conditioning upside down, so that we are able to absorb the teachings. It is all pure love and grace. We have no choice. We are going home with our Master.

The Masters tell us that when we do simran, our soul naturally starts to go up towards the eye centre. Just like a balloon, untied from the string holding it down, it naturally starts to rise upwards. No force is needed for our consciousness to rise up. It will naturally go up on its own when simran frees us from our attachment to the world.

Finding stillness of body and quietness of mind will allow us to practise simran with attention and love. Hazur explains that, ultimately, it is the sound, the Shabd, that creates complete stillness in the mind.

*The mind is like a monkey and does not wish to be confined and be still. It is its nature to be flitting from place to place and thought to thought, seeking ...the bliss which it once enjoyed in the region of Trikuti. When it is able to catch the Shabd, the divine Word, it will be still. ... Simran is an invocation, an appeal and a gradual turning inside. Persevere on, then the periods when you, the real you, are in control will increase.*

*Light on Sant Mat*

In the book *Seva*, stillness is intricately linked to quietness, silence, and listening. The author makes the point that Sant Mat is a path of listening. Through our meditation practice we develop our inner faculty of listening to the Shabd. Listening with our full attention develops a skill which truly has no bounds.

Guru Nanak assures us that

*Listening – even the blind find the path.  
Listening – the unreachable comes within your grasp.*

As quoted in *Seva*

Stillness and quietness; listening with devotion. The Master teaches us these skills as we walk this path in his company.



# The Greatest Gifts

What are the best gifts in this world? Some of the most expensive gifts include a collection of artworks by Picasso and other artists, valued at US\$1.1 billion, donated to a museum. And the Cullinan diamond, valued at US\$400 million, originally found in South Africa, and now part of the Crown Jewels. These are beautiful gifts at which we marvel. But what has mankind actually gained from them?

The saints tell us that the greatest gifts in this world do not have monetary value or artistic appeal. These are gifts bestowed upon the soul by the Lord himself. They include life in human form, meeting a true saint who imparts spiritual initiation, and the daily practice of meditation.

In his writings, Sardar Bahadur Jagat Singh tells us that it is only in the human form that the soul can realize God and retrace its footsteps homeward. Of the 8,400,000 species, man alone has this privilege. The saints are sent by the Lord to awaken us to the fact that this world is not our true home. Nobody is happy here as this is a place of pain and sorrow. We are urged to leave this prison house and return to our spiritual home.

This human life is a precious spiritual opportunity to escape from this creation. Saints tell us that it is the greatest good fortune to be born in the human form, and our responsibilities are correspondingly great. Having come up to the top of the evolutionary ladder, we must take full advantage of this opportunity and get maximum benefit from it by seeking a true Master, a Guru.

When we embrace the extraordinary gift of meeting a true spiritual teacher, we are led on to the path of God-realization. The Master will teach us how to vacate the nine portals of the body and enter the tenth, which leads to our eternal home.

Without a Guru it is impossible to proceed even an inch on the spiritual path. Without the protecting hand of a mystic adept, it may be hazardous to even try to ascend through the inner spiritual regions, as there are temptations to lead us astray and pitfalls to drag us down.

The gift of spiritual initiation from a true Master is specifically intended for the disciple on whom it is bestowed. The Master never initiates a soul

in error. Those who are designated by the Supreme Lord receive initiation, the most significant event in the history of a soul.

And how can this come about? Maharaj Charan Singh explains:

*When the Lord wants you to follow Him, to know Him, to go back to Him, He will give you the understanding and the urge. He will pull you from within and you will not be able to resist the pull. ... And by our own effort, we can never search for the Father.*

*We are all blind; only He has eyes. ... So it is for the Father to pull us. We cannot seek Him; at the most we can be receptive to that pull.*

*Thus Saith the Master*

When initiation is coupled with sincere effort in meditation and the grace of the Master, liberation of the soul from this plane of darkness and duality is guaranteed.

During initiation, the method of Shabd meditation – the practice of getting in touch with the divine creative power of the Lord – is taught to a disciple by the Master or his designated representative. In meditation we focus the mind at the third eye, where the Shabd can be heard. By meditating daily, we are also becoming detached from our worldly circumstances and are attaching our soul to the Shabd.

In addition to daily meditation the disciple is required to follow a vegetarian diet, avoid alcohol, tobacco, and recreational drugs, and live a moral life. When we abide by the spiritual principles of Sant Mat we are actually living by the highest standards in this creation.

The gift of initiation by a true Master is of incalculable value, and we can only be grateful for it. In *Die to Live* a disciple tries to express his thanks for Nam, for being accepted for initiation. Hazur Maharaj Ji responds:

*The real thanks we can give for initiation is to practise it and to live it and to mould our pattern of life accordingly. That is the real, actual thanks we can give to the Master. Mere words are meaningless. They don't carry us anywhere.*

But as our days mature into years and decades on this path, living by high standards consistently is not always easy. Lifelong adherence to our

spiritual principles requires perseverance, strength, and determination. In everyday life there will be times when our spiritual values are tested and challenged by our circumstances. But the eventual reward of trying to serve our Master will be infinitely worth it.

Also in *Die to Live* a disciple asked Hazur Maharaj Ji about living a life of service to the Master, and he told her:

Sister, the time we give to meditation is nothing but service to the Master. You cannot serve the Master in a better way than by following his instructions and living his way of life – attending to your meditation.

As we go through life, nothing that we undergo is good or bad. Everything is just an experience that we must find a way to use to our spiritual advantage. It is so easy for us to fall into the trap of classifying any experience as good or bad. Then what happens? The mind gets swept away in thinking, analyzing and judging. By thinking about events and people, rather than engaging in simran, we are squandering precious time that should be directed towards our higher purpose in life.

When we focus our attention on the present moment by engaging in simran, we alleviate the mental agony that the mind constantly subjects us to. Simran restores the mind to clarity, strength, and wellness by becoming receptive to the healing power of the Shabd. Instead of indulging in negativity we need to direct our attention inwards.

One could say that life is all about B to D: B for Birth and D for Death. That which is situated between B and D is C. As you might have guessed, C is Choice! Any day we choose, we can challenge ourselves to change for the better. Any day we choose, we can return to this spiritual path and renew our effort at meditation. Any day we choose, we can engage in simran more frequently. We can make these choices immediately, next week or next year. Change begins with choice.



# A Thankful Heart

Somebody once asked Maharaj Charan Singh what quality he liked most in a satsangi, and he answered: “a thankful heart.” He could have said devotion, love, obedience, or discipline, but above all these he valued thankfulness.

Are we thankful enough for being on this path and all that it entails? Have we really thought about what it means to be a disciple of a true Master? Do we appreciate the fact that after being lost in the creation, with all its suffering and misery, for hundreds of thousands of lives, we are on our way back home?

Great Master once wrote to a disciple:

*Your face is toward the light. Let nothing hinder or discourage you. You shall drink of the Living Waters, and be thirsty no more. No matter what may be your difficulties and deficiencies, they shall all be overcome, and the divine Shabd whose music never ceases within you shall sooner or later bear you upon its loving waves back to your original home. ... No one can say just how long it will take. But it must be.*

*Spiritual Gems*

It must be. How can we not be overwhelmingly grateful for such a promise?

And let's think about the handful of people who have this opportunity. In *Die to Live* somebody asked Maharaj Ji about Great Master's statement that only one person in several million might reach the level to be able to drink the divine nectar – in other words, come in contact with the Shabd. Maharaj Ji remarked that even if it's one in a million – compared to all the people in the world – it's a very good ratio.

I wonder whether we have the slightest idea what a tremendous privilege has been conferred on us. What could we ever have done to deserve this? But only the Creator knows best. And whether we deserve it or not seems to have little to do with it.

In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II we're told that without the grace of the Lord we would never be able to escape from here. In fact, nothing we have

ever done was ever enough to qualify us for this grace. Maharaj Ji tells us quite bluntly:

*We have done nothing. A man can never do anything to deserve all this. We can never do anything to deserve his love. He just gives it and gives it. We are too small-fry to even invoke his grace, because we are so helpless as humans in this creation.*

We can only be thankful to him for the opportunity to get release from the creation and go home. It's been a long journey, but it's coming to an end. Let's remember that when we struggle with our meditation, when we complain about how long it's taking for us to see any results. In the bigger scale of things it's probably not taking very long at all. Maharaj Ji once put it into perspective:

*Sister, the reason is very clear. Can you know when this creation came into being? Can we calculate when this creation started? Since then, we have been here in this creation. We can't even extend our imagination to grasp how long we have been here in this world and how many karmas we have been collecting in every life ... and we want to burn it just in a second, comparatively? Naturally it has to take time.*

*Die to Live*

We've been programmed to expect quick results from any effort we make. But this doesn't happen on the spiritual path. We have to undergo such profound changes to make ourselves fit for what's being given to us. We have to be transformed. We have to become pure enough to come face to face with God. We can't expect to rush this process.

And for that, to come face to face with God, we have been found worthy. But still, we look at our many imperfections, and we blame ourselves for our poor meditation. We know what karmas we've committed in this life alone and worry about the weight of karma we are carrying from many past lives.

But do you think that the Master worries about that? Not at all. He is the divine laundryman who doesn't only accept the cleanest garments to be washed. He accepts even the dirtiest, knowing that with a bit of scrubbing he will get them clean.

We should just feel very grateful that we have this opportunity, and show our gratitude by doing what he asks of us: by living the lifestyle he has designed for us and, most of all, by doing our daily meditation. And we don't even have to keep crying to ask for forgiveness. We just have to show our love by doing what he asks, and leave the rest to Him.

The struggle that we go through in meditation is the only meaningful way of proving that we are grateful for this tremendous grace that's been given to us, and showing that in our small, inadequate way we'd like to give something in return. All he wants from us is our meditation.

But if we are not working at our practice, perhaps it means that we don't appreciate what we have; that we don't understand the magnitude of being on a spiritual path and what it's going to give us. In *Spiritual Gems*, Great Master emphasizes how fortunate we are to have been initiated by our Master and to be on our way to Sach Khand. But he also says that our efforts – or lack thereof – can hasten or retard our progress.

Let's try to hasten the process. Let's work at our meditation – with as much commitment as we can, without expecting anything in return. Let's just sit, every day, in a spirit of love and deep gratitude, knowing that only this can help us to attain our eventual goal of going home to our source.

And let's not despair if we feel that we are failing. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Ji gives a very comforting reply to someone who's ashamed of her poor meditation – something she says can hardly even count as meditation. He says:

*Well, you can count all twenty-four hours in your meditation. If you build around you an atmosphere of meditation, every breath you breathe is meditation for you.*

If we're living in the atmosphere of meditation, then every breath is meditation. Isn't that reassuring? He seems to be looking for any excuse to shower us with his grace.

Maharaj Ji used to say that without the Lord's grace we would never even think about him, let alone love him or work to try to reach him. Everything stems from his grace.

We think so much depends on our own effort, and if we don't get this meditation right, we feel bad because of our failure. We see only what



we're doing or not doing. We don't see the part he is playing in bringing us to him.

His power is unlimited. There is nothing that he cannot do. Whatever happens, he is going to see us safely home. He could take us all up to Sach Khand immediately if he wanted. But that is not the Creator's design. The whole game of karma needs to be played out to its end because this is the Lord's will and perhaps a significant part of preparing the soul to return to its source.

And if we feel pain, even for this we should be thankful – especially if he allows us to feel the pain of separation from him. These pangs of yearning are tremendous grace. They're proof that the Lord himself is impatient for us to return to him and he is pulling us by our heartstrings.

It is this pain of separation that compels us to meditate. It's what directs all our efforts towards him. The more we feel the pull to return to him, the more painful it becomes, because we're becoming more and more anxious to find our way back to him. In our distress we may think only about our pain. We forget that he is the one who is pulling us.

He is the one who has set our sights on the goal of God-realization. He has planted this craving in our soul to return to the Lord and to be drowned in his love. But there is a price to pay for this. The price is our effort. But the final reward will be indescribably joyous.



# Conflicting Forces

We live in the creation buffeted by forces that are totally out of our control, such as electromagnetic forces and the powerful gravitational force of Earth. Added to these external forces, we carry both spiritual and karmic forces within ourselves. The karmic effects, lodged in our DNA, are binding and demanding – we are often powerless to act against them.

Kal has three powerful forces in his arsenal – attraction, desire, and attachment. These ensure that we are unable to resist the creation's charms, so that the soul remains locked in the finite world of bondage to the material world.

Fortunately for us, the most powerful of all forces, the spiritual force of Shabd, is also within us. It sits at the eye centre, manifesting as an inward and upward spiritual pull. The mind, however, has a downward and outward trajectory.

The result of these two conflicting forces is that each individual life becomes an arena of tug-of-war. On the one side we experience the beguiling outward pull of the world, and on the other, the inward magnetic pull of the Shabd.

We all experience the subtle power of attraction. We may not initially be aware of the effect a particular attraction will have on us – it may be seemingly innocent. And, even though we may be aware of the destructive consequences this attraction could have on our lives, we still may not be able to resist the person, situation or thing that attracts us.

The mind is enchanted by the world and its attractions. This unrelenting love affair with the world keeps the unfortunate soul locked in the creation, separated from God, and forced to continuously reincarnate.

This is the opposite of our goal, which is to disentangle the soul from the world and reunite it with the Lord. But we are seemingly oblivious of this – and of the greater infinite power from which we originated.

Soami Ji writes:

*Shabd and soul are in essence the same as God.*

*There is therefore a natural spiritual magnetic attraction between them.*

*Radha Soami Teachings*

It is through this magnetic power of attraction that God continuously draws the soul upward and homeward, while the mind on the other hand turns away from the influence of the Shabd and clings to the creation.

Attraction spawns desire, desire creates wants, and when we want a thing desperately we tend to ignore the consequences. Before we know it, desire has led to attachment and we are bound to the slippery slope of karmic liability.

Desire is a strong feeling of wanting to have something or wishing for something to happen. Life is geared to stimulating and satisfying our desires – be they for possessions, relationships, or sensual gratification.

We suffer from the illusion that we will be here for eternity enjoying these material comforts. We live with the delusion that wealth is real; we cherish our possessions and feel that the people we love are eternal. We are oblivious of the fact that if we have a strong desire for something, we must take another birth to fulfil the desire – so that the sheer force of our desires brings us back again and again, life after life, to the creation.

The Masters tell us to enjoy our worldly comforts with a sense of detachment, but as we continue to accumulate and cling to our possessions, attachment sets in. We may not appreciate or understand the power of attachment or the binding force it exerts on us, so we should pay careful attention to Maharaj Ji when he tells us:

*Karmas won't bring you back. ... It is our attachment to the creation which brings us back. You see, even if you have no progress within, but you are not attached to anything in this creation, nobody can bring you back here.*

*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. 1*

There's no harm in enjoying the company of family and friends, but we should remember that our relationships are the result of karmic influences – and love goes hand-in-hand with attachment and entrapment.

Great Master advises us not to give our affections to people of this world. In *Spiritual Gems* he asks: "What is the use in loving those who are not going along with us?" Our goal is to unite with the Shabd. But do we really understand what that means, and how it can be achieved? We foolishly spend our lives pursuing the creation and our immeasurable

worldly desires, in the belief that this will bring us happiness and satisfy our physical and emotional needs – a mirage that deludes us all.

While we may be aware of our attachments to our families, friends, and possessions, we may not be aware that on a subtle level we are also attached to our thinking, perceptions, and opinions – all of which are deeply ingrained in us.

The greatest attachment we have is to our self. Yet, the image that looks back at us from a mirror is not our true self – although we believe it to be. It is simply a physical covering that encases our soul.

When we tie this image to our ego and our mind, we manufacture the individuality that we cherish so much. Because there is no sign of the soul, we consider this image to be our real self, and the reason for our existence. This image is responsible for our ongoing attachment to the phenomenal world, and is the barrier between us and the Lord.

Our spiritual mission is to lose this false identity; to detach from the illusory individual, and merge back into the Lord. We should not be under the misconception that detachment is an easy task – whether it's from family, friends, possessions or the illusion of who we are. Perhaps many of us cannot face the challenge of detachment, because we fear the consequences of letting go. But we will go through our karma – whether we do so in an attached frame of mind or a detached one.

The process of moving from a state of attachment to a state of detachment does not happen overnight. We do not go to bed on Saturday and wake up on Sunday having attained detachment. It's a slow process. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I, Hazur Maharaj Ji tells us that it's impossible to detach ourselves from the creation, unless we are attached to the Shabd within. But if our attention remains rooted in the world, what chance do we have of doing this?

We need to shift our attention to simran – the process of disentangling the soul from the body and the clutches of the mind. If we don't do this, our experiences of the creation will continue to appear realistic, while the inner path to God will remain a fantasy.

We are standing at the intersection of materialism and spirituality. One foot is set firmly in materialism, the other is moving towards our spiritual belief. We need to take a gigantic leap of effort and plant that hovering foot

firmly in spirituality, and turn belief into experience, so that the Shabd becomes a reality in our life.

We have the golden key of meditation – it's time to use it. Meditation increases our attachment to the divine melody within, and that will disentangle us from the entrapment of this physical world.

Why do we waste this magnificent spiritual opportunity? We did not come here to experience impermanent worldly achievements. Our goal is majestic: it is to become the eternal Lord. When we change our attitude and shift our effort the miraculous happens.

As our meditation grows and deepens, the Master's magnetic pull draws us ever closer, into his spiritual orbit. Then, our desire and attachment for the creation recedes, and our love for the Master grows – he becomes the attractive object of our desire. Simultaneously, the Shabd becomes our reality.



# BOOK REVIEW

## The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming

BY HENRI J. M. NOUWEN

PUBLISHER: NEW YORK: DOUBLEDAY, 1992. ISBN: 0-385-47307-9

In this book Henri Nouwen (1932–1996), a Jesuit-trained Catholic priest, reflects on one of Jesus's best known parables, the parable of the prodigal son, drawing from it deep insights into what it means to seek union with God. The lessons of this parable are not uniquely Christian; they are universally applicable to anyone on a spiritual path.

In this parable, a man had two sons. One of them was obedient and stayed with the father, working in his fields. The other son was something of a scoundrel. He took his inheritance from his father and went away to a “far country,” where he wasted all his wealth on riotous living. Only when he had lost everything and was desperately poor and starving did he decide to try to go back home. This “prodigal son” knows that he doesn't deserve to be forgiven. He doesn't expect his father to welcome him back as a son, but thinks he might be able to work in his father's fields and at least he will have food to eat.

Wracked with remorse and fear, he makes his way home. While he is still far off, however, his father sees him and rushes out to welcome him home. The father is so overjoyed that he calls for his servants to prepare a great feast in celebration. But when the other son comes from the fields and sees the feast in progress, he is chagrined. He has been obedient, after all, and his brother has behaved very badly. Why, he wonders, should the father celebrate the prodigal son's return? Shouldn't the feast be for him, the good son?

As Nouwen understands this parable, it is the story of the homecoming of the soul returning to the Divine Father.

*The parable of the prodigal son is a story that speaks about the love that existed before any rejection was possible, and that will be there after all the rejections have taken place. It is the love that welcomes us home.*

Nouwen asks readers to identify with each of the three principal characters in the story – the younger son who is sinful, the self-righteous older son, and the Father who loves both unconditionally – to find meanings relevant to their own spiritual search.

The wandering, wasteful, and eventually starving son is perhaps the easiest to empathize with. Spending his inheritance carelessly, neglecting the true gifts of life, he only turns homeward out of abject need. He believes that he is no longer worthy of his father's love and care. Yet, as Nouwen points out so eloquently, each one of us must open to the knowledge that "There is One who awaits me with open arms and wants to hold me in an eternal embrace." We do not earn, deserve, or get rewarded with love. Nouwen writes, "His arms have always been stretched out to receive us. God has never withheld His blessing—never stopped considering us as His beloved child."

*God's boundless love is there. God's light is there. God's forgiveness is there. What is so clear is that God is always there, always ready to give and forgive, absolutely independent of our response. God's love does not depend on our repentance or our inner or outer changes.*

According to Nouwen, the road from the "far country" to God's embrace is travelled, and its end reached, only by unceasing prayer and meditation. But while the spiritual seeker makes the effort to pray and meditate, "God is the father who watches and waits for his children, runs out to meet them, embraces them and pleads with them, begs and urges them to come home." Nouwen points out that we need to understand that God is longing for us more than we are longing for him:

*I am beginning now to see how radically the character of my spiritual journey will change when I no longer think of God as hiding out and making it as difficult as possible for me to find Him, but, instead, as the one who is looking for me while I am doing the hiding.*

The older son, in Nouwen's commentary, is just as much in need of spiritual help as the prodigal. For, while the elder brother has been obedient and loyal to his father, he has also become self-righteous. Nouwen notes that out of the "bedrock of human resentment" comes a never-ending stream of complaints from "a heart that feels it never received what was its due."

*It is the complaint that cries "I tried so hard. I worked so long, did so much, and still have not received what others get so easily." Self-righteous, self-pitying words. Often I catch myself complaining about little rejections, little impolitenesses, little negligences.... I discover within me that murmuring, whining, grumbling, lamenting, and griping.*

Sometimes the self-righteousness of the “good disciple” is subtle. But Nouwen describes that selfishness with surgical precision:

*When I give advice, I want it to be followed.*

*When I give help, I want to be thanked.*

*When I give money, I want it to be used my way.*

*When I do something good, I want it to be remembered.*

However, the real failing of the obedient son is that he doesn't understand the gift that the father has always been giving him. The father responds to his complaints: “My son, you are with me always, and all I have is yours.” The older son has misunderstood the nature of unconditional love, thinking it is earned, is a reward – meaning it can also be lost as a punishment. Nouwen notes that this misunderstanding is shared by most people. He confesses, “I quickly come to think of God as the keeper of some great celestial scoreboard, and I will always be afraid of not making the grade.” As in this case, Nouwen's ability to speak so candidly about his own shortcomings and failures not only makes the book particularly authentic, it also helps the reader to identify her own subtle, unconscious weaknesses.

Whether we see ourselves more as the prodigal son or as the obedient but self-righteous one, Nouwen suggests that the key to spiritual growth lies in cultivating gratitude and trust. He considers both of these positive attitudes to be important disciplines, rather than a matter of temperament or feelings. He writes:

*In the past I always thought of gratitude as a spontaneous response to the awareness of gifts received, but now I realize that gratitude can also be lived as a discipline. The discipline of gratitude is the explicit effort to acknowledge that all I am and have is given to me as a gift of love, a gift to be celebrated with joy.*

The steadfast practice of this discipline involves making a choice, and making that choice over and over again:

*This is a real discipline. It requires choosing for the light even when there is much darkness to frighten me, choosing for life even when the forces of death are so visible, and choosing for the truth even when I am surrounded by lies.*

Similarly trust is a discipline and a choice we can make:



*Trust is that deep inner conviction that God wants me home. I have to keep saying to myself, "God is looking for you. He will go anywhere to find you. He loves you. He wants you home. He cannot rest until He has you with him."*

It may come naturally for a spiritual seeker to identify with either of the sons, or with both of them. However, Nouwen insists that the reader can also identify with the all-loving and embracing father. Can we stretch ourselves enough to imagine what it would be like to love and to forgive unconditionally and universally? Nouwen suggests that we human beings can act out of our own innate compassion for our fellow creatures. He reminds us that we do have the capacity to forgive, to bless, to be kind, to be generous. He asks himself,

*Can I give without wanting anything in return, love without putting any conditions on my love? Considering my immense need for human recognition and affection, I realize that it will be a lifetime struggle.*

The journey from the "far country" to the Father's home is an inward journey. This "homecoming" is a return to one's own truest self. As Nouwen expresses it, it is a journey to the center of one's own being:

*Home is the center of my being, where I can hear the voice that says, "You are my beloved"... The same voice that speaks to all the children of God and sets them free to live in the midst of a dark world while remaining in the light. I have heard that voice. It has spoken to me in the past and continues to speak to me now. It is the never-interrupted voice of love speaking from eternity and giving life and love wherever it is heard. When I hear that voice, I know that I am home with God and have nothing to fear.*

This book is a treasury of reminders for those on a spiritual journey towards the loving embrace of the Divine Father. It is so rich in spiritual guidance that it invites multiple readings.



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