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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Face to Face

*Day after day, O Lord of my life,
shall I stand before Thee face to face.
With folded hands, O Lord of all worlds,
shall I stand before Thee face to face.
Under Thy great sky in solitude and silence,
with humble heart
shall I stand before Thee face to face.
In this laborious world of Thine,
tumultuous with toil and with struggle,
among hurrying crowds
shall I stand before Thee face to face.
And when my work shall be done in this world,
O King of kings, alone and speechless
shall I stand before Thee face to face*

Rabindranath Tagore, *Gitanjali*



A Fantasy Coming True

The *Pocket Oxford Dictionary* describes fantasy as: “A fanciful invention or composition, a daydream, a mental image, a work of the imagination, especially when extravagant”.

And what has this got to do with Sant Mat? Well, doesn't the path sometimes have as much sense of reality as a fantasy?

Consider what the Masters tell us about the path. In a nutshell, they say it is a story of the journey of the soul. Once the soul dwelt in a fabulous place called Sach Khand, the home of God. Then souls were sent away from their home to experience life in all its forms and eventually develop a longing to return. When they want to return, after a very long time and many different incarnations, God sends one of his perfect sons to collect those longing souls and bring them home.

It's already beginning to sound just a little bit like a fairy story.

But now, with no disrespect intended, let's consider the soul. Have you ever met yours? Do we know what the soul is, where it is, what it looks like? For most of us at this point in time it is nothing more than a work of our imagination, and yet the whole of Sant Mat is about it!

Then, what about this talk of a 'third eye'? Have we ever seen one? So how are we to gather our attention (whatever that may be) in a place we can't see or feel? Then, the soul must exit the body through this third eye to start a journey through inner spiritual regions. Without being frivolous, isn't this beginning to sound like fantasy or science fiction?

And there is more. We are told that once the soul exits the body it will cross the stars, the sun and the moon before meeting

the Master in his Radiant Form – a form more splendid than even our fanciful imaginations can concoct. Then comes the journey through many mansions until we reach our celestial, eternal home.

Truly fantasy! Only our imagination can help us here.

Perhaps it seems like a fantasy because many of us have had no personal experience of inner light, sound or the journey itself. And the lack of clarity forces us to ask endless questions. The fact that we cannot get satisfactory answers to our questions adds to the fantasy-like nature of the path.

As we cannot provide answers, we must turn to the source – the Masters. Everything we know or think we know about the path comes from the Masters. And the marvellous thing to remember is that although their words may seem only as real as fantasy to us, they are in fact descriptions of their own personal experience on this fantastical journey home.

What does the Master say to us when we ask, “What’s it all about? Why are we here?” Basically he says something like this: “The whole truth and nothing but the truth is beyond your present capacity to understand, so I am giving you the pre-school version. But I do not deny you access to the Master version. I give you a technique which, if you practise diligently, will afford you the same experiences of which the Masters talk.”

And so the big question is: Do we in fact need to know more than this to follow the path? If one is plagued with a devious mind that says it must have all the answers before it can commit itself, then it is useful to make a comparison between following a worldly discipline and a spiritual one.

At this human level many of us have had experience in learning disciplines, art forms or skills. One such discipline is singing, and it is interesting to note the similarities and vital differences

between starting to sing and starting on the path of Sant Mat. Very simplistically it goes like this:

The first thing is that the student or disciple shows an interest, requests lessons or applies for initiation. The teacher says: “Why do you want lessons?” The student says: “I want to sing at La Scala Opera House.” The teacher says: “Sing for me, please.” He hears that there is potential although little experience or skill. However, it’s the potential that’s important, so he says: “Okay, let’s do this.”

The Master says: “Why do you want to be initiated?” The disciple says: “I want to reach the home of my Father.” The Master sees how much karma remains to be paid by the disciple and that this is a soul marked to return home. So he says: “Okay, let’s do this.”

Quite similar so far.

At this point both the teacher and the Master have to explain certain fundamentals to the would-be student/disciple.

Teacher: “In order to reach La Scala we must make a journey to discover, release and unlock the hidden potential of your voice. This will be achieved through diligent practice of certain exercises I will give you. Are you prepared to practise?” Student: “Absolutely. I will do anything to reach La Scala.” So the singing lessons commence and the journey begins.

The Master says: “In order to reach Sach Khand, the soul must reach the third eye. You will be able to reach it if you follow certain disciplines that I give you. Will you practise?” Disciple: “Absolutely. I will do anything to reach Sach Khand.”

So initiation is granted and the journey begins.

Once again – quite similar.

Then the teacher says: “Now, I am going to explain some concepts. In the beginning they will only be my words, but if you practise hard then one day they will become your own experiences

and you will understand them. Full understanding is not important now. What is important is the practice that will lead to experience. You must sing from your stomach and project your voice out of your body through your eyes.”

The student is confused because he knows his vocal cords are in his throat, so how can his voice come from his stomach? He doesn't think he has holes in his eyes, so how can his voice come out of his eyes? Nevertheless, he agrees to suspend disbelief, trust his teacher and practise hard to gain the skill that will lead to La Scala.

The Master says to the disciple: “Here are some concepts that I will explain. You will not understand them fully yet. You do not need to understand fully. What you need to do is practise hard and then one day the practice will turn the work of your imagination into direct experience. You must gather your attention at the third eye so that your soul can leave the body and start its inner journey into spirit realms.”

Once again it sounds familiar. But here comes a big difference. The singing student says: “Okay, fine – I'll trust you and simply get on with the job, even though I don't understand.”

The disciple, faced with the same situation, says: “Yes – but: How? When? Where? Why?” year in and year out, until even his very patient Master could be forgiven for feeling exasperated!

That's the first crucial difference. Here is the second: The student begins to struggle. He begins to doubt and question his teacher's skill and reassurances. So he says: “Can you guarantee that this technique will get me there?”

And the teacher in all honesty has to say: “No, I cannot guarantee it. But I see you have the same potential as other students of mine who are now at La Scala. Please persevere.” And the student does, redoubling his efforts.

But when the disciple says to the Master: “I am full of fear and doubt. Will I ever get to the third eye?” What does the Master answer? He says: “There are no failures in Sant Mat.”

And what do we do? Do we go home and redouble our efforts when we have been guaranteed success by our Master, who is no ordinary human teacher, but the Son of God, the Word made flesh? Do we?

In order to reach our human goal we give our all – our blood, sweat, tears, money, time, youth; we suspend disbelief. And for what? For a goal that fades and dies.

What will we give for an eternity of peace? Will we suspend disbelief once and for all? Will we give our blood, sweat and tears, our time and our effort to unite with God and leave here forever?

Let’s remember that we started out by saying that the path sometimes seems like a fantasy and asking: Must we have the whole truth before we can commit ourselves fully to the journey? And the answer is *no*.

It doesn’t matter that there are no clear answers. We need to suspend disbelief, in the way we are prepared to do in worldly disciplines, trust the Master and simply work. He promises that eventually there will be meaningful answers and experiences. So let’s be happy with that and move on.

The mind will never be satisfied with any answer the Master gives it and will simply throw out the next question. But if it didn’t pester the singing student so much, then why should it hamper the disciple? Because, if we could be content with the Master’s answers instead of constantly questioning, we could use that mind space for simran. And the mind’s boss, Kal, most definitely does not want that. So the mind is programmed to present doubts, fears and confusions to keep us away from simran.

Worst of all, those intellectually clever questions keep us away from knowing that we need to please our Master. Would it make any huge difference to our meditation if our Master told us the whole truth of why and how we came here, and how karma, free will and reincarnation work? It would probably confuse us even more. Does it matter if it seems like fantasy? No.

Let's give up the questions, doubts or reservations completely. Let's live in the seeming fantasy for now. Let's give our time, blood, sweat and tears to that one thing we know – we want to please him. And how do we do that? We try to be obedient and we give him our efforts at meditation and living a Sant Mat way of life.

Our efforts are all we can give and all that he wants. Success or progress on the path are for the Lord, for the Master to give. He knows what we need in every aspect of our worldly and spiritual lives. He knows how much love and longing for him we can deal with. He knows what success in meditation we can handle, or not!

Wanting to please the teacher, to win his favour, is a natural part of following any discipline.

But no matter how hard we work to please any worldly teacher, still he cannot guarantee our success. In fact, only a perfect teacher can do that, because he already knows the results. Such a teacher is our perfect living Master. He is also the Word in human form. And still more, he is here with us in the flesh precisely so that he can take us home.

And what will please him? Simran, meditation, humility, simplicity, obedience and faith will please him.

Master wants us to try at our meditation, he wants us to live a Sant Mat way of life, and he wants us to remember him. Simran is thinking of him, remembering him. The more we think of him and try to please him, the more opportunities we give him to shower

his grace upon us. Let us believe we can take charge of this effort business and go for it 100 per cent!

We know our ultimate fate because our infinitely kind and compassionate Master has told us: “There are no failures on the path.” So isn’t it time to stop the mind’s tricks that keep us from trying to please him constantly and, thereby, from watching the fantasy become real?

Why don’t we just spend every day thanking him for that promise of ‘no failure’ and do our level best to please him? This is the only gift we have to offer in return for his magnificent generosity and love.



*Seek the company of a Saint
and apply yourself only to meditation on the Nam;
other pursuits are of no use to you.
Strive to swim across the ocean of existence;
through your love for maya
your human birth is going to waste.*

Guru Arjun Dev, *Adi Granth*

Human Beings and Being Human

Today we'll use our imagination to see how the little spark of life begins. Imagine a soul cruising along at some point in time. Then bang – it's placed inside a human foetus. Some months later a little person is born.

That happened to each one of us at some time in the recent past. The key question is: Do we realize the significance and great privilege of this event? Are we suitably grateful for this amazing gift?

Souls have been around since the beginning of this creation. That's about four and a half billion years ago according to scientists. Some would refer to it as the Big Bang. Some time thereafter these souls were sent into the creation and have been cycling and recycling endlessly through the creation in various forms and bodies ever since. This process is known as reincarnation and the transmigration of species.

During this process of coming and going all souls have accumulated a large amount of debt in the form of stored karmas. This is because whatever is done by the soul's current body and mind has an effect on everything else in creation. It's a bit like Newton's third law which says something like "for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction". Debts incurred in this way require to be repaid, in order to maintain the long-term balance in the universe. Good is repaid with good and bad is repaid with bad.

For reasons best known to himself, the Creator has showered his grace on your soul and given you a human birth this time around. You were born with a built-in handbook that will govern your life, without compromise, from birth to death. In fact this handbook was placed alongside your soul at the time it entered the unborn child. This handbook we know as our pralabdh karmas. Some would call it their

destiny. Think of it as the programs and files stored on the hard drive of your computer if you will. As the files are used up they disappear.

None of this placement of your soul is by chance. Your parents, your siblings, your pets, your friends and acquaintances are all pre-determined by your karmas and the needed interactions with each other's karmas. These pralabdh karmas are extracted from your stored or sinchit karmas according to your wishes and desires at the time of death in your previous life.

In reality *you* choose your parents. Now there's food for thought!

If you make progress on this path you will come to realize that there is nothing outside of yourself that has any real long-term value. You will begin to see that living in the will of the Lord is the only way to go. Those words from the Lord's Prayer of the Christians – 'Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven' – will become clear and carry weight with your mind.

The karmas were recorded in heaven and have to be lived out on this earth. The place for desires will become smaller and smaller. There is great merit in dying desireless. In fact we are urged to think of and desire only our Master at the time of our death.

So far all these things mentioned above are controlled by the negative power, who in Sant Mat literature is referred to as Kal. His mandate is straightforward. He has to keep souls within his realms until they are marked by the Creator and initiated into the mysteries of the sound current by a perfect living Master. Thereafter Kal has no jurisdiction over that soul. The remainder of that soul's journey back to the Lord is now under the control of the Master. You are marked, you are initiated, and your ticket and passport for the journey home are provided.

But you are unable to do this on your own. You require a perfect living Master, who has himself been there, to show you the way. All

you have to do is follow the Guru's instructions given to you at initiation.

If you start now, and are going to live for twenty years – assuming you're giving one-tenth of your time to meditation – you can spend a total of at least two profitable years making rapid spiritual progress. If you procrastinate for ten years and then begin, you will halve your benefits unless you double your input. Perhaps there really is some urgency here.

The fundamental problem with this handbook mentioned earlier is that we are unable to read it. Of course, it is a *virtual* handbook, but if you could actually hold it in your hands and open the covers, you would find apparently blank pages from cover to cover. You are not allowed to read it. There are instructions there, however, and they will be followed subconsciously, relentlessly and meticulously until all are finished. At that time the book will close and this body will die. Your hard drive will have developed a fatal error, if you like. The new files you created, however, will be transferred automatically to the backup drive of stored karmas. With this current body dead, the soul will continue its journey and be placed appropriately into the next body.

In other words, the soul will then continue its journey burdened with an extra load of karmas that we have added to the pages of the handbook as we worked through the invisible instructions.

This human birth really is a very precious gift and we are all guilty of taking it rather lightly. It is only after many, many lives on this planet that we're given the chance of being born with the attributes of being human.

Nature is made up of five separate elements. It is only man who has all five in his makeup. We are composed of earth, fire, water, air and ether. It is the ether element that differentiates us from every

other species in creation. It is this attribute that makes us aware of ourselves as individuals and gives us the unique opportunity of understanding the concept of a supreme being.

Imagine you're getting along with this life, page by page from your virtual handbook, when all of a sudden it is written that your soul has been doubly blessed with the meeting of a perfect living Master. He will initiate you into the path of the Saints. This too is a rarity for humans. There are now something like six or seven billion humans on this planet, yet only a very few are marked for this wonderful gift brought by the Master. I'm referring to the gift of Nam or Shabd which the Guru gives freely to his marked souls when he initiates them.

Baba Ji has told us to try to be better human beings. Let's listen to our Master and try from now on to be better at our unique humanness.

And here's some really good news. If you *do* get down to some meaningful meditation, if you *are* able to enter the third eye and pass into higher spiritual realms, you *will* be able to burn away the rest of your karmas as well.

Therefore you could, with due diligence and effort, wipe out enough to gain yourself a pass from coming back to this painful creation. This can be achieved in this very lifetime. It should be our ultimate goal. You won't even need to contemplate being a human again!



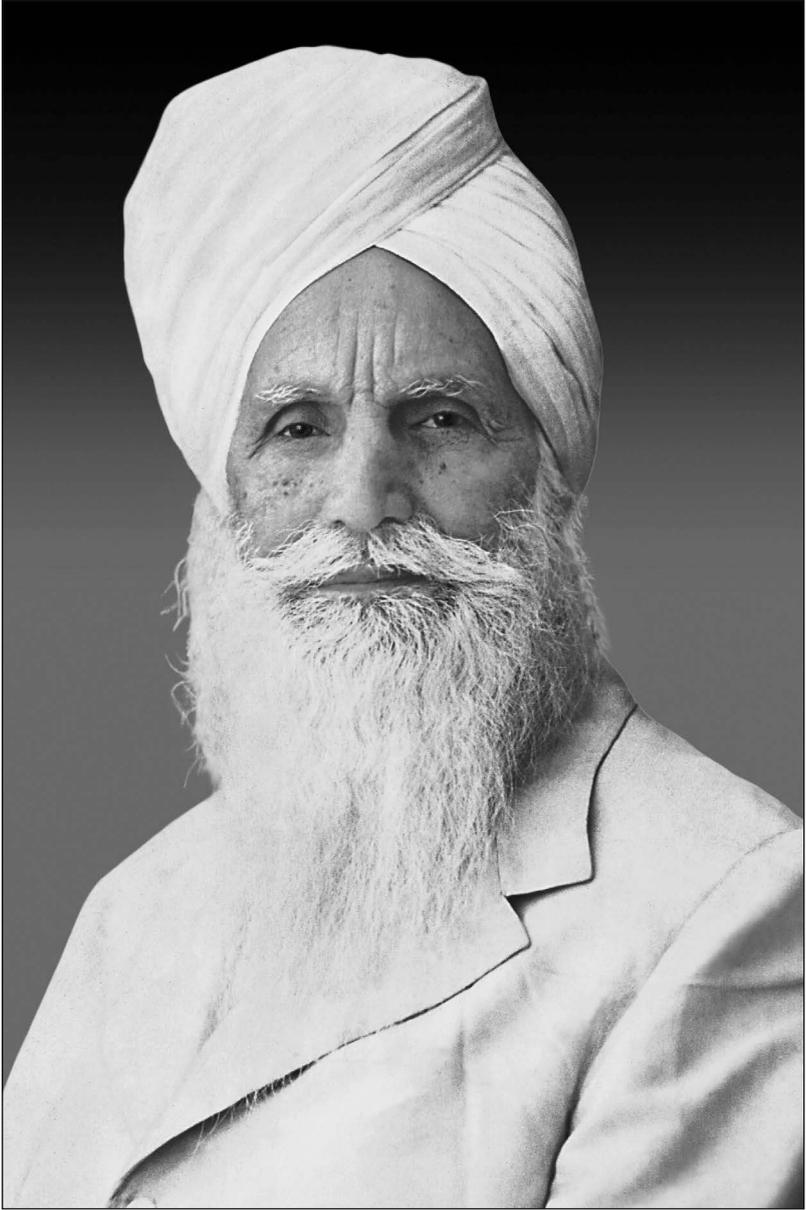
The Joy of Being

Unhappiness or negativity is a disease on our planet. What pollution is on the outer level is negativity on the inner. It is everywhere, not just in places where people don't have enough, but even more so in places where they have more than enough. Is that surprising? No. The affluent world is even more deeply identified with form, more lost in content, more trapped in ego.

People believe themselves to be dependent on what happens for their happiness, that is to say, dependent on form. They don't realize that what happens is the most unstable thing in the universe. It changes constantly. They look upon the present moment as either marred by something that has happened and shouldn't have or deficient because of something that has not happened but should have. And so they miss the deeper perfection that is inherent in life itself, a perfection that is always already there, that lies beyond what is happening or not happening, beyond form. Accept the present moment and find the perfection that is deeper than any form and untouched by time.

The joy of Being, which is the only true happiness, cannot come to you through any form, possession, achievement, person, or event – through anything that happens. That joy cannot come to you – ever. It emanates from the formless dimension within you, from consciousness itself and is thus one with who you are.

Eckhart Tolle, *The New Earth*



The Great Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh

Body, Mind and Soul

In the book *The Path of the Masters* Julian Johnson tells us that the Creator has constructed us in such a way that we are able, when properly informed and trained, to place ourselves in conscious communication with the entire universe of universes. He tells us that we are in fact a replica of the entire universe but on a very small scale, and for that very reason we are able to consciously reach the universes lying outside and inside of ourselves.

This is why we speak of the human body as a microcosm, a little world. And it is a fact that we have the ability, when our faculties are awakened, to actually hold conscious communication with the most distant heavens, to explore the outermost and innermost regions of space.

As initiates of a perfect living Master, getting in touch with the 'universe of universes' that Julian Johnson mentions, and claiming our noble inheritance, is our primary concern.

So let us take a closer look at the relationship between the body, mind and soul, the microcosm and the macrocosm, and the divine energy that is pervading all and giving life to all. And let us consider how we can literally experience these universes and heavens while still living on this physical plane.

To quote Julian Johnson again:

Note the nucleus of each atom, surrounded by its electrons. The relative distances between those electrons, when compared with their sizes, are quite as great as those between any central sun and its planets. Thus the human body is a vast and complicated system of universes, clustered together in a single unit.

The Path of the Masters

Within each tiny atom is an incredible amount of energy that no scientist can claim to understand. This energy is the primary creative energy, the Shabd, the divine Word of God that gives energy to everything in creation, from the highest heaven to the lowest possible plane, and everything in between.

In 1905, when Albert Einstein made the intriguing case that a large amount of energy could be released from a small amount of matter, he felt that he had finally tapped into “God’s thoughts”. This was expressed by his equation $E=mc^2$ which measures the quantity of energy released when the atom is split.

Back in 1899 the scientist Max Planck proposed that the atom was an “ideal oscillator”. An oscillator is something that flips back and forth or on and off repetitively.

Since then, scientists have discovered that when the atom oscillates, it is actually flickering in and out of physical existence millions of times per second almost at the speed of light. This constant flickering means that at the subatomic or quantum level, nothing of the material world is solid. All the suns, stars and galaxies in the whole cosmos are a quantum mirage, oscillating in and out of reality. This oscillating in and out of existence creates light and energy, and the whole universe is like an energy-filled blinking light. Therefore at the core of every atom, every nucleus is nothing but powerful energy-giving light.

Scientists think that they are the first brilliant people to have discovered this, but this is exactly what spiritual Masters have told us throughout the ages, though in simpler terms.

In the words of Jesus:

In it [the Sound, the Logos] was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.

John: 1:4

The inner light is within everyone, but we do not see it because the mind is directed towards the world of the physical senses.

Of course, the light and sound that Masters speak of is the Shabd or spirit. This creates the vibration which produces divine sound, which in turn produces divine light, which in turn gives life and energy to atoms.

To quote the Great Master:

This is a natural science, not man-made. Saints of higher degree, like Shamas Tabriz, Maulana Rum, Hafiz and others, followed the same science. At present there is no higher science than this.

Spiritual Gems

The science that he speaks of is the Science of the Soul.

Life and intelligence are dependent upon Spirit. Everything in creation, be it inert matter or living tissue, has Shabd within it. It is just the degree that varies. Nothing can exist without Shabd. Therefore living tissue has a larger concentration of Shabd within it. This 'larger concentration' is what we call a soul.

But why are we humans so special? Why are we called the top of creation? Because we as humans have been given an amazing gift from the Lord – we have the potential to achieve self-realization and then God-realization. And this in spite of the belief among many Christians that man was born in sin.

In *A New Earth* Eckhart Tolle writes:

According to Christian teachings, the normal collective state of humanity is one of 'original sin'. Sin is a word that has been greatly misunderstood and misinterpreted. Literally translated

from the ancient Greek in which the New Testament was written, to sin means to miss the mark, as an archer who misses the target, so the original sin is to miss the point of human existence.

What makes us miss the mark? Why are we ignorant of our divine duty? The reason for this squandering of our human life is the ego. Ego is what makes us commit the original sin; makes us constantly miss the mark, not understand the true purpose of our amazing human existence.

The seventeenth-century philosopher Descartes erroneously thought he was acknowledging the ultimate proof of existence when he famously said: “I think, therefore I am.” What he should have said was, “I think, therefore I have an ego” – because he had found, not proof of existence, but the root of the ego.

Why is thinking not proof of existence? Because we are not our minds, our egos or our bodies. These are simply tools that are given to our souls to use in this material plane. Our true existence, our true identity is the power behind the thinking.

During meditation we go beyond the mind. We leave thinking behind, and realize that the ultimate truth does not lie in our ability to think. The ultimate truth of who you are is not “I am this” or “I am that”, but “I am”.

The ultimate truth can only be realized during meditation. Just being able to think “I am” is not self-realization. Self-realization can only happen when we reach the fourth spiritual region, which is where our soul, unencumbered by the mind and body, realizes its true glory and can then proclaim “I am”.

At initiation the disciple is given certain vital information that is necessary for spiritual success. And he is instructed in the method of meditation, by means of which he will develop inner sight and hearing and begin his journey to spiritual liberation.

Following initiation the disciple commences the spiritual exercises in which he has been instructed. In ordinary waking life the mind and the soul are diffused throughout the body. But during meditation they must now be gathered and concentrated at this one point in the forehead, at the spiritual third eye.

This concentration is facilitated by simran, the repetition of certain words given by the Master. We must repeat them until they are a part of the very fibre and substance of our being. We need to do two types of simran – the one to create focus during meditation, and the other as ‘background music’ throughout the day whenever we are not engaged in mental tasks.

When the attention is fixed unwaveringly at the third eye, all the powers of both mind and soul gather at that inner centre. When concentration is complete the initiate then does bhajan, which is listening to the music of the Sound Current.

This results in the spirit current or soul being slowly withdrawn from the body. The entire spiritual being then moves towards the eye centre, and the inner worlds – the ‘universe of universes’ – are entered.

Slowly the disciple experiences flashes of light or hears various sounds. Eventually the soul has sufficient force to penetrate the so-called tenth door. At first the disciple only peeps out through this door. But by and by he goes through it and the soul, astral body, causal body and mind leave the physical body completely. The disciple then steps into a new world, which he has never seen before.

Julian Johnson describes what happens next:

At a certain point just below the astral world, something happens which changes the whole course of the disciple's life and also his method of travelling upward from that point on. This is the meeting with his own Master in his omnipresent, higher

Radiant Form. It is the Master, his own Master, appearing just as he does in physical life, except that his body is now much more fine and beautiful and full of light, brightly illuminated.

The Radiant Master there and then receives his disciple with much love, to the great joy of the disciple. From that moment on, the two are never separated throughout the journey to the still higher regions. The Master's Radiant Form, actually, is always with the disciple from the moment of his Initiation, but the disciple cannot see it. But from here on, the disciple can see his beloved Master in the inner worlds as well as the outer world of this earth.

By means of the technique of the Masters' science, the disciple has now learned how to leave his body and rise at will above this world. Thereafter, in the company of his Master he follows the holy path that leads him from earth upwards through kingdom after kingdom, each one more splendid than the other, until the Master brings him to the end of the Master's Path, the Fifth Region, where the disciple becomes one with his Lord, the Supreme Ruler.

The Path of the Masters

Many initiates become discouraged when they have not achieved this level of spiritual development. But let's persevere. Every round of simran, every minute spent in bhajan, gets us closer and closer.

The darkness that we are aware of immediately upon closing our eyes is like an untuned TV screen.

It is the very same darkness in which the Radiant Form of our Master is waiting for us. Once we have gained more concentration, the seeing faculty of the soul will develop and the darkness will be replaced with light.

So keep on meditating, keep on shooting for the stars. We will succeed. And always remember this profound statement: “A big shot is just a little shot who kept on shooting.”

So let's keep shooting!



*“I am too deeply enmeshed in mistakes to make
any spiritual progress,”*

a student confided sadly to Paramhansaji.

*“My bad habits are so strong that I'm worn out
by my efforts to fight them.”*

*“Shall you be better able to fight them
tomorrow than today?” the Master asked.*

“Why add tomorrow's mistakes to yesterday's?”

You have to turn to God some time, so isn't it better to do it now?

Just give yourself to Him and say: ‘Lord, naughty or good,

I am Your child. You must take care of me.’

If you don't stop trying, you will improve.”

He added: “A saint is a sinner who never gave up.”

Paramhansa Yogananda, The Master Said

A Search for Reality

Many of us have come across this little song. Maybe we sang it at Sunday school:

*All things bright and beautiful,
All creatures great and small,
All things wise and wonderful,
The Lord God made them all.*

*Each little flower that opens,
Each little bird that sings,
He made their glowing colours,
He made their tiny wings ...*

Of course, then our minds were too immature to appreciate the deep message contained in these verses. But if we look at this little song now, we see that its message forms the bedrock of all religions and belief systems.

All the mystics from the dawn of time have tried to impress upon man his interconnectedness, his interrelation, his unity with everything around us – not only with our fellow human beings, but with the universe, the animals, the plants. We are all particles of the whole. Whatever we see, whatever we experience is a manifestation of this eternal oneness. The divinity at the core of our being is the same divinity that illumines the sun, the moon and the stars.

But man, through greed, has upset the divine sequence running throughout the planet. He has damaged or broken so many links in this chain that perhaps for the first time in history his own existence is threatened.

He has destroyed the rain forests; he has polluted the rivers, the sea and the air; he has wiped out so many species of animal and plant life. He is experimenting with food and introducing foreign genes into crops. He has upset the climate. We see strange and eccentric weather conditions happening throughout the world.

The world is going through turbulent times. We're faced with unstable financial markets. We are in the throes of a global food crisis. Now we must ask the question: How did humankind allow itself to get into this situation? Where did we lose the plot? How did we get into this mess?

In 1990 while making its way into outer space the spacecraft Voyager took a photograph of Earth. Voyager was at that time more than four billion miles away, and the photograph showed this infinitesimal dot of blue among millions of stars and planets. That was Earth, this planet we live on. This amazing picture showed how insignificant our planet is in the vastness of the universe.

At the time the astronomer Carl Sagan said Earth looked like a tiny dot, a mote of dust suspended on a sunbeam. And yet it was home to all the men and women who had ever lived. He marvelled that throughout history so much blood had been spilt by generals and emperors so that for a brief time they could become masters of a fraction of this tiny dot.

This is the condition of humankind. We live our lives on this little dot, hurtling round the sun at 67,000 miles an hour. In the grand scheme of things this little dot is barely a grain of sand on a beach. But for many this is the be-all and end-all of our existence. All our dreams, our aspirations, our objectives, our hopes, our desires, our loves are associated with what is happening on this little grain of sand. And we have become so attached to what transpires on this grain of sand, so absorbed in its activities, so engrossed in its attractions that we truly

believe that this is all there is to life. We regard what we see around us as the only reality.

If we look at humanity today how does an ordinary person occupy his time? Mostly it is spent in working for others. We may have to bring up a family. We work for our spouse and children, or care for aged parents. We have to provide them with the necessities of life. The average office worker, for instance, gets up in the morning, travels to work, carries out his duties and returns home. In the evening he may spend time with his family.

And this is his routine, day in and day out. He struggles to make ends meet. There are pressures in the domestic set-up. There are deadlines to be met at work. There are numerous stresses he has to cope with.

Then, as if this is not enough, there are three unpleasant ghouls always hovering in the background: old age, disease and death. He seldom has time to ponder: What's it all about? Where am I going?

The poet Wordsworth sums up our plight quite beautifully in his ode "Intimations of Immortality":

*Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting;
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting
And cometh from afar.*

Wordsworth refers to our existence here as 'a sleep and a forgetting'. The average person has forgotten who he really is, he has forgotten his divine essence.

And this is the message that the mystics from the dawn of time have been trying to get across to us: that we are living in a state of consciousness dominated by ignorance. The purpose of the mystics is

to reawaken people to their true identity as sons and daughters of God.

To find our true identity we have to follow a mystical path. Mysticism is a science that leads from darkness to light, from ignorance to knowledge. The only real purpose of human life is the search for reality. And to know reality we must meditate. There is no other way to unfold the divinity in us.

Through the practice of meditation we will expand our consciousness and reach that stage where ignorance is left behind and all the mysteries of life are revealed to us. Then we will be able to echo the words of Christ: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, we speak that we do know, and testify that we have seen.” (John 3:11)



*I stretched out my hands to my Lord,
and to the Most High, I raised my voice.
And I spoke with the lips of my heart,
and when my voice reached Him, He heard me.
And His Word came to me,
and gave me the fruits of my labours;
And gave me rest by the grace of the Lord.
Hallelujah
The Odes of Solomon*

His Will is His Greatest Gift

The path of Sant Mat is often described as a path of love, devotion and meditation. It might also be called a path of submission and surrender.

Perhaps the aspects of surrender and submission are given less prominence though, because they seem less romantic, less appealing to our soft notions of love. There is no doubt that the concept of surrender is difficult for many of us. Surely, we might think, it's enough to love the Master, to be devoted to him, to be trying our best at meditation? Do we really need to examine these difficult words – surrender and submission? Do they need to be part of our approach towards the path in anything other than a casual and peripheral way?

The answer to these questions is going to depend totally upon what we want to achieve on the path. If our personal goal is to trundle along sweetly without any major inconvenience to our worldly life, then we may not have to confront submission and surrender in anything other than a superficial way. But if we truly and sincerely want to learn to love him from the very depths of our being, then we have to come face to face with those words and make them part of the fabric of our lives – because the greatest act of love is to surrender willingly and live in someone else's will.

Why should we give up anything of ourselves to another being? It's a very tricky question. The best way to answer it is by painting a picture of a child – a small child sitting in the lap of her father. When she is sitting in her father's lap, the little girl feels completely and utterly secure, loved and content. She has no fear, no anxiety, no burdens and no responsibility. She trusts him to be strong, loving and in charge and simply relaxes in his embrace, accepting his control and his will. The Lord is all-powerful and all-loving. Why not give up our



Maharaj Charan Singh

fears, anxieties and troubles and climb into his lap? Why not trust him to be in charge, knowing that he has no murky hidden agendas, and that there is nowhere safer to be than in the lap of our Father?

In our hearts many of us probably want this. We want to hand over, we want someone else to be in charge, and we desperately want to feel loved and secure. So then, why aren't we all there, in the lap of the Lord? Why are we not really prepared to submit ourselves to his will?

The answer is simple and is to be found in the question: What is it that we should surrender? Well, the Lord doesn't want our wealth, our possessions or our bodies. So, what does he want us to give up for him? It's our ego – small word, huge implications. If we want to find ourselves as little children sitting in the lap of the Lord, we are going to have to surrender up our ego. Our concepts of self, of individuality, of being in control, and of personal ownership and accomplishment are going to have to go because they are all aspects of ego. Our ego manifests itself through the workings of our mind – our thoughts, our words, our desires, our actions are all reflections of our ego. Those three little words – I, me and mine – our sense of self, are what keep us seemingly separate and distant from our Father and his all-loving embrace.

Every perfect Master is an example of surrender, humility and obedience. Marvellous examples of this are to be found, for example, in the letters that Baba Jaimal Singh wrote to his disciple Babu Sawan Singh, who would go on to become the Great Master. Almost without exception the letters are addressed to “My obedient son, Babu Sawan Singh”, and one of the most frequently recurring themes is that of submitting to the will of the Lord. He constantly urges Sawan Singh to accept whatever comes his way with meekness and gratitude. He constantly urges him to see himself as insignificant in the scheme of things and to accept fully that God is the doer and giver of everything. He says:

Whatever is to be done has already been done, and that is what will happen – man does not do anything by himself. Believe implicitly, my son, the Satguru has told us that man does nothing – only the means for doing appears to come through him. Remain dauntless and do your duty. Whatever is to happen has already happened.

Spiritual Letters

What an amazing quote and what a lot of extraordinary information it imparts – directly from a perfect Master. He is telling us clearly: “Man does nothing”. We are not the movers and shakers we so fondly consider ourselves to be. We do not come up with the great ideas; we do not scale the highest mountains, sing the most beautiful notes, accomplish the greatest deeds. We do nothing other than what has been preordained or allowed by the Lord. He says we are merely the “means for doing” – what an interesting and illuminating phrase. As we use tools to do a task, so the Lord uses us, allows us to be his tools, his means of keeping creation going.

So does this mean that we are merely puppets dancing on a string? Yes, we are. Can we create or achieve? No, we cannot!

The Lord is the giver. The Lord is the doer. We are his servants, dancing to the magnificent music of creation. We have been given a part to play; we have been privileged to be entrusted with a thread in the Lord’s tapestry. But it is his play, his tapestry. It is all his, every atom and every second is his. What we will do, what we will get, has all been decided before our birth. We do not pull, shape or colour our thread in the tapestry – nor start it.

If we could truly come to grips with this concept – that ‘not a leaf stirs’; that our ‘very breaths and the hairs on our head are numbered’, then we would see how small and powerless we are

and how great he is. We would realize we are nothing and that everything comes from him. We are reading the lines he has written for us in his play.

So how then can we claim to be responsible for our 'great accomplishments'? How can we claim to 'own' things? Puppets own nothing and do nothing other than that allowed by the hand pulling the strings.

The mind immediately comes up with its standard retort: 'If he is the doer, then why do I need to make any effort in any direction at all?' – especially where meditation is concerned!

The answer is complex, but appears to be this: That we have been given the mind to use as a specialized tool at this level of creation, and the Lord wants us to learn to use it intelligently. He wants us to see the difference between the higher, more spiritual tendencies of the mind, and the lower, more base tendencies of the mind. The higher aspect of mind can lead us to the eye focus, and its lower tendencies draw us into the world of sense pleasures.

He wants us to use the mind which is turned upward to realize that he is the doer and we are not. He wants us to seem to come to our own conclusion that we are nothing and he is everything. He wants us to use the higher mind as a tool in our search for surrender to his will. He wants us to make effort and then learn to accept whatever the outcome may be. It is his outcome, not ours.

There are a number of things we can do to try and live within the will of the Lord and in so doing surrender our ego to him.

First and foremost, of course, is our meditation. Second, and not less important, is our attitude, our approach to life as reflected in our thoughts, our words and our deeds. And thirdly, we must use our simran as we go about our daily routine. We know that our Master wants us to meditate. It is his will that we should meditate.

If we follow the Master's will, then we are, in effect, following the Lord's will. The Master is the Lord in human form; his will is the Lord's will. If he says meditate and we do at least try, then we are beginning to understand and to live within the will of the Lord.

There is no question about this – it is not open to discussion or debate: Meditation is our number one priority – even though we are at this level of creation where we know nothing other than the mind, and where we must appear to make our own decisions and fight our own fights.

Meditating, however, must go hand in hand with an approach to life that is based on the Master's example. We need to cultivate an attitude of acceptance, obedience, gratitude, humility and positivity. The Masters tell us that the Lord is love. So then, if the Lord is love, and everything that comes to us comes from him, then it must all be given in love – whether seemingly good or seemingly bad. Everything we have, every state or condition we find ourselves in comes from him, with his love.

We dance to the Lord's tune, in every aspect of our life. And it is a glorious tune, one in which we are privileged to participate. It takes many notes to make a symphony, many players to make a play.

An initiated soul has not only been granted the privilege of playing a part in the Lord's play, but has also been assured that his part is finite. It will come to a true ending and he will be removed from the stage once and for all. An initiated soul will return to the Source. Surely this should make us dance for joy. Surely we should not be dragging our feet, moping, questioning or doubting. Is this not a good time to say: "I believe you are in charge and I am grateful – grateful for everything you have and still will send, no matter what it may be"?

Rumi says:

Except what You wish me to know, what do I know?

Except what You show me, what can I see?

I will live like this, if You wish it.

If You keep me in some other state, I will live like that.

As quoted in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. IV

But still, the ego isn't going to bow down overnight. It's not going to leave the ring without a monumental struggle.

However, he does not leave us weaponless in this struggle. He has given us the precious gift of simran. The repetition of the five holy words is the tool Master gives us to help us train the mind and bring the ego into an attitude of surrender and submission. When in doubt, turn to simran; it is our refuge in times of deepest despair and struggle. Simran is our trying to become 'as little children' and climb into the Father's lap. It is our shout of gratitude and our call for help. We can have no better response than to turn to our words. Simran is our act of surrender to his will.

In accordance with his will, creation happened. According to his will souls were sent into creation. In accordance with his will those souls fulfil their God-given function and play the roles he has assigned them. In accordance with his will a perfect Master has come into our lives, and, in accordance with his will, that Master will take us Home.

Does that not make the Lord's will his greatest gift? Did it not send us our Master? If we try our absolute best, then we will learn to live in his will. If we try to walk in the footsteps of our Master we too can aim towards surrender and submission.



From the Rim to the Axis

The central truth of our existence is that we are spirit and that spirit has become entangled in matter.

By the touch of a Master's hand, smitten with love and longing, we still grope about in darkness and cannot find a way out of mind. Where is that portal within mind that will once again connect us and then reunite us with the Beloved?

Our whole dilemma and our salvation are both simultaneously contained within the image of the spinning wheel: at the rim there is ceaseless movement, the vertigo and nausea of a mind in perpetual motion, while in the axis there is pure stillness.

To slip from the rim to the axis is the key.

We spend most days in the blur and whirl of the spokes, retiring each nightfall cut and lacerated by the spokes of life. Is there a way out of pain? Where is that place of peace?

It lies within.

On this plane action is inevitable, life comes at us from point-blank range. And it is only action itself that can free us from action – the action of daily contemplation or meditation, the way of repetition.

The five words going around and around in the mind define the circumference of that axis within. Simran both creates and sustains the silent centre. When thoughts threaten the inner sanctum our simran deflects them away, so defining and defending that place of peace.

In the equanimity of a motionless mind we are ushered into the presence of the Beloved. We experience the currents of love and bliss emanating from within our very own soul – currents that in time mingle with that supreme current of love and light, the Shabd. Questions of effort and grace now dissolve after years of diligently

doing the inner work. The journey from the rim to the axis is also the movement from theory to knowing, from concepts to understanding.

And yet the mind rejects simran. It sees itself as all-powerful and all-knowing. It wants to think its way out of entanglement. It expects a complex formula to solve the complex questions of human existence. How to get this small self out of the way? How to surrender an entity, the mind, that is possessing us? Only simran can neutralize and numb the mind. Only repetition, something so divinely simple as a child counting marbles, can open up that clear and quiet space within the complicated mind.

At our level of consciousness, repetition is surrender.

Analyzing only makes our predicament worse and tightens the stranglehold of mind.

We are told to live in the moment, the now. Yet no human mind can stand a vacuum. Clear a little space and that inner vacuum is soon imploded by thoughts. It is a law of nature. Occasionally when our lives and karmas are in balance, we taste a little of that inner peace we are so thirsting for. Yet it does not last long. How to attain and maintain a connection with spirit despite the ups and downs of life, an invulnerable peace? Daily meditation with firm and concentrated simran is the timeless answer. The circle of repetition protects the space of the now, the eternal present, all that is.

Yet, it is a sad fact that when the world consumes us and we lose our balance, our meditation is often the first to suffer, so converting our little bumps and knocks into true drama. Only by giving regular and consistent time to meditation can we retain inner peace and perspective. To lose a little money or your health is irritating, to lose your centre is devastating. To go through suffering while connected to the presence of the inner Master dissolves the very notion of suffering. We are to cling to simran as a drowning man clings to a life-ring.

When the going gets tough, the tough get meditating.

We are to win our freedom amid the madness and motion of life. Anyone can be still, calm and loving when everything is going right. A serenity not attained amid turbulence is not serenity at all, it is circumstance. Simran takes us to the silent axis amid the spinning wheel of karma, our inevitable reaping and sowing. We are to trust its simplicity to once more reunite us with the simple One.



*A wheel has thirty spokes; but its use
depends on its centre of emptiness.
Clay is made into vessels; but the use of the vessel
is in its emptiness.
A house has doors and windows; and their use
lies in their emptiness.
So it is that there is the use of what is,
and the use of what is not.*

Tao Te Ching

Remembrance

Have you ever thought what it would be like to wake up in the morning and not remember anything? Not to remember the person lying next to you, to have no recollection of your children, your family, your home, your life!

If you have no recollection you would not be able to identify them, and there would be no emotional attachment – they simply would not matter to you. All you would have would be the present moment, with nothing to relate it to – no past, no future.

Memory is that which serves to keep in mind or to bring to mind. To be able to remember is a wonderful gift, for it gives us the ability to identify people, to know who they are and what role they play in our lives; to recall events; to know who we are.

What we choose to remember defines us both individually and collectively, for remembrance will mean different things to a nation, the soldier, the spouse, the colleague, family, friends, children and grandchildren.

Remembrance is the act of remembering. It functions on a number of levels, some deeply personal. Remembrance is the reach of personal knowledge and it is necessary for us to function in the creation. The reality we see and touch is only real as long as our perceptions and concepts are alive. When they go, the reality goes, because the reality is related to the memory of our learning.

In a spiritual context though, remembrance is simply the practice of the remembrance of God. Through our ability to remember we keep our Master alive in our hearts.

Every mystical path and religious doctrine informs us of the importance of constant remembrance of the Lord's Name. In

Christianity, for instance, a significant instruction in connection with remembrance of the Lord is the sacrament of Holy Communion. In one of the letters of St Paul it is written that the night Jesus was betrayed he instructed his disciples to “partake of bread in remembrance of the Lord’s body, and drink in remembrance of the Lord’s blood.” (1 Corinthians 11:23–26). Jesus is quoted as having said: “Do this in remembrance of me.”

To understand the true meaning and depth of remembrance we can ask three questions: What is to be remembered? How are we to remember him? And, why are we to remember him?

The first question: What is to be remembered? Of course, God is to be remembered. But how?

In *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. IV, the Great Master tells us that God is without form, is present everywhere, yet is invisible and is beyond the reach of human intellect and imagination. But if we can’t see Him and we can’t imagine Him, then we don’t know what He looks like, so how can we ever build a relationship with Him and remember Him?

The answer is: To be able to form an association with the Lord and to develop divine love, we must work through a perfect Master, a Saint.

Our association with the Master directs us inwards and upwards to bring us to that state where we can know the real form of the Master – the true Shabd – or God. And so, our acts of remembrance are to be directed toward the Master, for in remembering him we remember God.

The second question: How are we to remember?

In that same volume of *Philosophy of the Masters* the Great Master says: “God is formless, but He reveals His light in the human body.”

We therefore remember Him by the way he reveals Himself to us, which is through His light within our human body. Simran, dhyān and

bhajan are simply our efforts to find that light within and to connect consciously with the Radiant Form. These efforts are nothing but our remembrance.

Moreover, when remembrance is done properly, when our simran is done quietly within the depth of our own being as instructed by the Master, the remembrance of the names also helps to mould the character traits of the disciple. Through repetition and remembrance, we are told, we assume the qualities of the one we remember.

Is it possible to remember Him continuously? Probably not at our spiritual level. But that does not mean we shouldn't practise – for practice will bring improvement until we are able to develop the ability to remember Him for significant periods during our day.

What's more, simran is swimming against the forceful current of the river of maya. But if we are persistent in our remembrance of our Master, we will eventually develop the ability to control our thoughts and focus our attention. The more we are able to keep our simran running, both during the day and at the time of meditation, the greater our ability to stop the ceaseless babble in our minds, and the better we will be able to distinguish between what is important and what is not, in our daily lives. In this way we begin to learn the benefits that simran brings in helping us to disentangle ourselves from the world.

The third question: Why are we to remember – to remember him?

There is a profusion of wonderful benefits that accrue to us when we obey the Master's instruction, but we should not look to what we hope to gain. Rather, we should simply practise his remembrance because it is asked of us. Simply because he has instructed us to remember him. This is how we will return to him.

In the words of Kabir: "Remembrance of God's Name leads to him."

In a nutshell, that is what it is all about.

Thought, Word and Deed

By thought, word or deed – this is a phrase we often use, in one context or another. And if we think about it, the phrase encompasses just about every action that we take. The three words seem to be interlinked. We either think, say or do something. Most actions start with a thought, which is then followed by word or deed, or both.

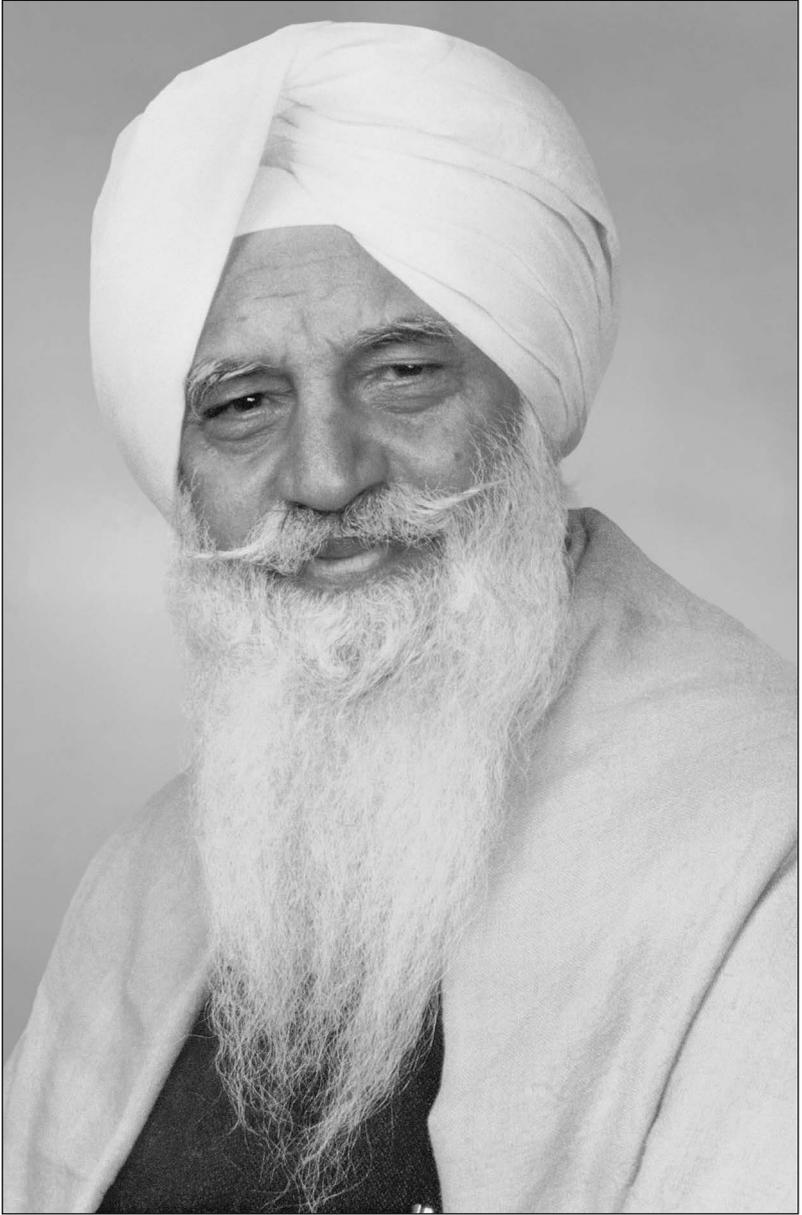
The Masters tell us that although thoughts do not create karma, they are nevertheless extremely powerful, because almost inevitably our thoughts will lead to speech or action, and through those we do create karma. They warn us to think carefully before acting, to be level-headed and clear-thinking.

Over and over we have heard Baba Ji caution us to think before we react. He advises us to be clear about what our motives are before we take action or before we say anything. Very often, if we are honest with ourselves and dig deep enough, we might be aghast to discover the true motive behind our words and actions.

As human beings we very often act or speak on impulse, without proper consideration. Someone may say something we do not like or make an impatient remark, and immediately a negative retort rolls off our tongue.

Jesus taught that gentleness can avert anger, and every Master echoes that. If only we could get into the habit of biting our tongue, gathering our thoughts and allowing love to govern our thinking by keeping simran uppermost and continuously in our thoughts, we might be astonished and delighted to find how, through the right thoughts, the right words and deeds will follow.





Maharaj Charan Singh

The City of Light

Various books of the Bible have been translated and retranslated many times. A contemporary rendition of Psalm 87 conveys not only much of the beauty of the original but brings to it a poetry of its own.

*In the heavenly realm stands the City of Light;
the Beloved welcomes all who come to its gate,
all who have surrendered themselves to Love.
Glories await you within the citadel,
within the City of Light.
Among those who enter are the humble and kind,
those who reflect peace and radiate integrity.
Those who have faced darkness
with Love by their side.
Prepare yourselves for the City of Light
all you who hear;
for the Most High reigns there in glory.
Your name is written in the holy register;
when you face the Recorder,
who will blush with regret, and
who will join the heavenly chorus?
Those who live by the Spirit of Love
will know joy and harmony in
the everlasting Dance of the Cosmos.*

Psalm 87

Nan C. Merrill, *Psalms for Praying*

Answering the Call

We have embarked upon the most important and arduous undertaking of our whole existence – the most difficult challenge we have ever faced since coming down into the creation. We have been called to follow this path.

One sometimes wonders why: How did this come about? What did we ever do to merit this? What method of selection turned up our names? There can be no explanation other than unfathomable grace, through which we have been selected, and to which we have responded with a sense of joyous recognition. It can only be by grace that we've been drawn to undertake this incredibly difficult and frightening, seemingly impossible venture: the work of taming the mind. Because that is what we have to achieve if we want to succeed with this, the greatest of all undertakings.

But this task – demanding and seemingly impossible – is also the most glorious, wonderful, miraculous and awesome venture of our entire existence. Never before have we attempted anything remotely like it.

The ultimate reward is something so precious and huge and noble that we can only consider it with awe. *We are going to find out what love is.* We are going to merge into the vastness of love that is God. We are going to become love.

Most certainly we must have earned this immense grace in previous lives. We've done it all, the Masters tell us. Over eons of time we have had one life after another. We've known countless successes and failures in different bodies, and we've lived through countless chapters of destiny. We must have often worked hard to achieve certain goals, and even achieved them.

But nothing – no past experience, no grand quest that we ever embarked upon – could even begin to compare with what we are now trying to do; nothing has ever been this difficult. And nothing has ever promised a greater reward.

And the wonder of it is that once the call comes, we know that we simply must go. It is beyond understanding – an inexplicable knowingness, for want of a better word. The Master has called us and we are going. It's not negotiable and never was. If a soul is marked, that soul will be drawn to him.

This great goal would be utterly beyond our reach if we did not have him, the one who called us, to help us. If we did not have our Master we would not even know about it and life would be empty and futile, a never ending cycle of births and deaths.

But we have him, *we have a Master*. Let those words never be spoken lightly. Few other sentences could ever be so deep or profound. We are blessed beyond comprehension.

We know what to do. It has been explained to us over and over. So let us gird our loins, straighten our shoulders and stiffen our spines, and let us get down to work.



From the day that a Satguru initiates a person he internally contrives in such a way that while the person undergoes the pralabdh or fate karma, arrangements for his reaching Sach Khand are going on side by side.

The Science of the Soul

Get up, Sit up, Shut up

Do you have a favourite Sant Mat phrase? Until recently my wife and I would exhort each other to meditate with Bulleh Shah's stirring words: 'Arise! Awake! Do not snore!'

Now as the new decade begins we have a new call to action – in her words: 'get up, sit up, shut up'. But, if I dare try to improve on my wife's observation, following it will get us sitting silently. What's next?

Maybe a Zen saying can help: don't just do something, sit there! Nicely paradoxical, but sitting is itself an action: doing something. And what of our rampant mind? We need to get back to basics: simran and bhajan.

Someone once asked Maharaj Charan Singh in a question and answer session why Master would always insist we 'do our bhajan and simran'. Was there some other message? Maharaj Ji replied, dead-pan: "Do your simran and bhajan."

Read all the books of philosophy and religion you like. Meet the perfect living Master of your time, and he or she will invariably emphasize meditation on the Sound Current as the essence of the teaching.

Maybe the Zen saying needs some add-ons. Let's offer: Do sit there and do just simran. Simran is specific spiritual work. It is absolutely not a fuzzy, warm remembering of Master. Nice as this is, it cannot bind our attention or 'shut up' the mind.

Instead, try the simran test: If we don't know which name we are repeating when sitting in meditation, we are not doing simran consciously enough. When the words roll into each other, half-remembered, vaguely repeated, it is a start. But unfocused repetition is insufficiently respectful of Master and his majestic path inwards.

It will take a lifetime of effort for most of us, but practising simran is the only way to perfect simran. Sitting with a straight back (health permitting), repeat simran at the eye centre. We don't consciously cease doing this or that in the mind; simran will itself stop all the 'busyness'.

Simran is not a type of thinking. It is a process of becoming aware by repetition of Master's given words at the given centre. To repeat – and repetition is the whole point – simran is not thinking, cogitating, daydreaming, philosophizing, speculating or planning.

All of these concern 'me', what the 'I' did in the past or wants to do in the future. The only way to be in present time and with Master is to say his given simran behind the eyes.

Simran centres us at the point where superconsciousness begins; it releases us from other types of mental activity; it gives us a break from our ego-full self; it anchors us in the present; it delivers us to the quiet place where we begin our real work of bhajan. So let's revise our self-advice: 'get up, sit up and do simran.'

And yet, simran itself isn't our goal, it is the means for us to become one with the Shabd. What really matters is that simran habituates us to the eye centre, where bhajan will hold us and take us upwards and inwards.

The path is Shabd Yoga, with capital letters, because Shabd is Master, Shabd is the sound we experience in meditation, and Shabd is love.

Maybe, with all due respect to my partner, we can re-revise our daily exhortation to: 'Get up, go up and stay up.' I'll miss 'Arise! Awake!', though.



Book Review



The Imitation of Christ

By Thomas à Kempis. Translated by William C. Creasy

PUBLISHER: Notre Dame, IL: Ave Maria Press, 2004.

ISBN 0-87061-231-X

Thomas à Kempis (1380–1471) wrote *The Imitation of Christ* for his fellow monks in a small, newly formed monastery outside the town of Zwolle in the Netherlands. Perhaps he never imagined that its appeal would reach far beyond the monastery walls. Today *The Imitation of Christ* is said to be the most widely published work of Christian spirituality after the Bible. In it Thomas covers all aspects of life and death: joy, dignity, dejection, confidence, loneliness, arrogance, peace, love, desire, guilt, hope and understanding. He offers guidance and deep inspiration for any student of spirituality, regardless of religious background.

The Imitation of Christ is a collection of four separate writings that have been compiled under one title. In Book 1, “Useful Reminders for the Spiritual Life,” Thomas discusses the foundational work necessary for a serious spiritual seeker. He asks the spiritual aspirant not only to strive but also to be brutally honest with himself: “*the greatest and most useful lesson we can learn: to know ourselves for what we truly are, to admit freely our weaknesses and failings and to hold a humble opinion of ourselves because of them.*”

He pinpoints our human failings, but also recognizes our normal human feelings. He understands the struggle. The titles of chapters give us a glimpse of his astuteness: Of Confused Feelings, Of Resisting Temptations, Of Avoiding Empty Hopes and Self-Praise, Of Heartfelt Remorse. He discusses, for example, our tendency to be drawn out into the world by unnecessary talk. “*I wonder why are we so eager to chatter and gossip with each other since we seldom return to the quiet of our own hearts without a damaged conscience. The reason is that by idle chit-chat we seek comfort from one another and we hope to lighten our distracted*

hearts.” The real devastation caused by this “*chatter and gossip*” is the loss of feeling the divine presence. “*What a mistake! This outside comfort is no small detriment to the inner comfort that comes from God.*”

Thomas confirms that life can be challenging. “*Truly, life can be a great trial! The more one wishes to be spiritual, the more difficult the present life can seem, for as one progresses in the spiritual life, his flawed nature becomes more and more apparent.*” However, he suggests that our so-called difficulties have great value.

Sometimes it is good for us to have troubles and hardships, for they often call us back to our own hearts. Once there, we know ourselves to be strangers in this world, and we know that we may not believe in anything that it has to offer. Sometimes it is good that we put up with people speaking against us, and sometimes it is good that we be thought of as bad and flawed, even when we do good things and have good intentions. Such troubles are often aids to humility, and they protect us from pride.

In fact, he says, we are only troubled by events because we want things to work out according to our wishes. He asks: “*Why are you troubled because things do not work out the way you would like? Is there anyone who has everything he wants? I don’t. You don’t. No one on Earth does. There is no one in the world without some trouble or uncertainty.*”

His message is positive. He gives deep and abiding encouragement: “*My dear friend, do not lose confidence in progressing in the spiritual life; you still have time and opportunity. Get up and begin at once and say, ‘Now is the time to act. Now is the time to fight.’*” Stressing the importance of making use of the present moment, he reminds us of death: “*The present time is very precious. Now is the acceptable time. The time will come when you will wish for one day or one hour for changing your ways ...*” If this is not enough to rouse us into action, he asks: “*If you are not prepared today, how will you be ready tomorrow?*”

Book 2 is called “*Suggestions Drawing One toward the Inner Life.*” Thomas’s role in the monastery was to mentor the novices. It is perhaps

because he worked with those new to the devotional life that his advice is so practical. Rather than expound abstract theory about ideals like love or humility, he writes: *“See how far you still are from true love and humility? A truly loving and humble person does not know how to feel anger or indignation toward others, and if he does, he recognizes such feelings as his own weakness.”* He writes, *“we frequently do wrong, and to make matters worse, we make excuses about it!”* He stresses being honest with oneself and non-judgmental toward others: *“We are quick enough to feel it when others hurt us – and we even harbour those feelings, but we do not notice how much we hurt others. A person who honestly examines his own behaviour would never judge other people harshly.”*

Thomas explains that great effort must be exerted until we begin to depend only on God. *“We must each wage a long and fierce inner struggle before we learn to master ourselves fully and to focus all of our love on God.”* He also addresses the common misconception that once one is on the spiritual path life should be all bliss. He calls such an attitude mercenary. *“Can we not call all those people mercenaries who are constantly seeking spiritual comfort? Do they, who are forever thinking of their own comfort and gain, not prove that they love themselves more than they love [God]?”* Rather, Thomas states, *“if He should send you pain and sorrow, you ought to be thankful ... for whatever he permits He does for our own good.”*

Book 3, “Of Inner Comfort,” is written in the form of a conversation between Lord Christ and the Disciple. In one passage, the Disciple is reminded to quiet himself so that he can better hear. *“Blessed are the ears that are attuned to the soft whisper of God’s voice and that ignore the buzzing of the world ... be silent, and visit the quiet recesses of your own heart. It is there that you will hear God’s voice.”* Christ advises the Disciple to acquire the virtue of humility, saying, *“you are easily overcome, easily upset, easily weakened. Of yourself, you have nothing to be proud of, but many things ought to humble you, for you are weaker than you know.”* However, he also talks about the sweetness that the spiritual aspirant experiences and the proper attitude towards

those experiences. “*Sometimes you may be suddenly seized by intense spiritual feelings and seem to soar toward heaven, and then, just as quickly, you may drop back to earth, back to your own foolish thoughts. Such feelings are not illusions. Enjoy them when you feel them, and be thankful for them, but do not seek them out.*” He explains that spiritual experiences are a gift from God and that we must “*maintain a spiritual calm.*”

In the end, all the advice given and lessons learned are only to acquire love. “*Nothing is sweeter than love, nothing stronger, nothing more sublime, nothing more expansive, nothing more joyful, nothing more abundant or better in heaven or on earth. Love is born of God ...*”

Book 4, “The Book on the Sacrament,” discusses the Catholic Church’s practice of Communion. Even those who do not engage in this practice may benefit from Thomas’s advice about the attitude to take toward a spiritual exercise.

The Imitation of Christ is a treasure-trove of spiritual guidance and uplift. As the writings do not have a linear structure, the reader can find gems of wisdom in each chapter. There are many very good translations of *The Imitation of Christ*, and the reader will find wonderful inspiration in any of them. Several are available free on the Internet. This translator, William C. Creasy, presents a translation that is very accessible to the modern ear.



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