

November 2014

Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre
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VOLUME 10 • ISSUE 11 • NOVEMBER 2014

All That Is Necessary

*Search for a true Guru, my dear friend –
he is the rarest jewel in the world.
The true Guru manifests himself
to those he showers with his grace...*

*Let me tell you everything you need to know
to recognize the true Guru,
the one who is dyed in the colour of Shabd.
Open your eyes, you will see him close by.
What more can I say?
I have revealed the whole secret.
From now on it depends upon your destiny, beloved!
If you do not act on what I've just said,
you will keep drifting from form to form.
Radha Soami has said, and said at length,
all that is necessary.*

Soami Ji, Sar Bachan Poetry



A Journey Towards the Master

When Baba Ji gave satsang at our regional Centre earlier this year, many of us travelled long distances to see him. An effort had to be made, but driven by our desire to see Master we pulled out all the stops. We re-arranged plans, organized childcare, booked train or bus tickets, woke up early and travelled through the night and morning to sit at his feet and listen to his satsang.

Throughout the world, wherever Master visits, there is the same reaction. Sitting on the train, or in our cars on the way to satsang, we worry that any delays might mean we won't see him. Driven by this desire, we put Master at the forefront of our minds. We think about him and perhaps we do our simran. This feeling is a gift. Maharaj Charan Singh in *Die to Live* says:

That is why Christ said: blessed are those who mourn. The Father creates that feeling of separation in us, and when we feel that separation, we long to become one with him.

Imagine what we could achieve if we started every day with the same motivation, not to see the Master in his physical form, but inside through our meditation. In reality Master is always there waiting for us to come and see him. If we really knew this to be true with the same certainty we have when we know we will see Master giving a satsang, we would put meditation at the top of our priority list. Just as we do when travelling to see the Master at one of the Centres, we would get up early – as early as it takes. Or if that weren't possible, we would find a way to make space for meditation in our lives.

But in reality, when we weigh up sleeping for a bit longer with sitting up in the cold and dark, we think, "Ah, I'll just do it later in the

day, or tonight”. And down Master goes on our list of priorities. When it comes to the crunch we don’t really believe he’s there at all.

What can we do to help us believe it? As satsangis we have some key tools at our disposal. We can do simran, the repetition of the five holy names. This stops our minds from straying into the outside world and helps us focus on our spiritual goal. We have satsang, a regular meeting where we spend time listening to a talk on Sant Mat. There is also the opportunity to do seva in any small way we can. All of these things give us an environment to think of the Master and engender that longing and that love for him in our minds.

So, after our long journeys we reach the Centre scheduled for a visit by Baba Ji, and we feel at peace. We know Master will be there soon. We sit and listen to the shabds and all thoughts of our lives slip effortlessly back down that priority list. When the Master walks up to his seat we know we are in the right place and it all feels so simple. We think, “Of course this is important. How could I not know this all the time?”

Our main tool, of course, is meditation itself. When we allocate two and a half hours each day to meditation, we slowly develop love for the Master. We realize the peace and joy of his presence and take one more step back towards our home with him.



*I think continually of those who were truly great.
Who, from the womb, remembered the soul's history
Through corridors of light where the hours are suns,
Endless and singing. Whose lovely ambition
Was that their lips, still touched with fire,
Should tell of the Spirit, clothed from head to foot in song.*

Stephen Spender, *Collected Poems*

Thoughts on Seva

The experience of doing seva is always inspiring. However, it's only recently that I have come to see how little I have really understood it and what a unique opportunity it represents.

During a visit to the Dera years ago, a foreign visitor would have the opportunity to carry out *mitti*, brick or grass seva, or any other manual task that Maharaj Charan Singh allowed us to share. With youth and enthusiasm it was easy to feel uplifted, sitting and cracking old bricks into bits with small hammers, or moving sandy soil in a leaky basket supported on our heads by a little cloth ring. Shoulder to shoulder with thousands of brothers and sisters and taking our turn to dump our bit of sand into a vast ravine, we would gaze over towards the Master. Maharaj Ji would be sitting nearby doing some of his paperwork as we turned, went back for another round, and once again caught that glimpse of him as we emptied our basket. This is what was engraved on my mind as seva – physical effort presented with devotion at the feet of the Master's physical form. Not only that, but I was pretty sure that the task could not be accomplished without me and the rest of the human, earth-moving chain.

Now this is not strictly true. If we think about it, we will see that the Master deliberately gives to his satsangis the chance of carrying out work which he could easily get done by other means. Exactly why does the Master offer us the opportunity of seva? Just what is seva? And do sevadars really play an essential part in helping the Master accomplish his work?

The present living Master is also giving us opportunities to come together in his name and perform seva. Throughout the world the organization is purchasing land and buildings in which satsang can be held. This gives us the opportunity to design, rebuild, upgrade and

clean them, and carry out a multitude of other tasks before continuing with the general maintenance. Just as at the Dera, the physical seva is offered with love to the Master, although in this case he may be thousands of miles away at the other side of the world. Does the fact that he is not physically present make it any the less? No.

Learning to work together

Seva is an opportunity given to us by the Master to wash a little of our ego away. It is one of his gifts to us, and always comes with his personal invitation implicit within it. And if we approach our seva in the right way, it has a wonderful effect. Sometimes while doing seva, we have the opportunity to get to know people who were strangers to us before; and in working towards a common goal we have the pleasure of engaging in the kind of friendly cooperation that is pleasing to the Master. Occasionally we may find ourselves paired with a sevadar who has a view contrary to our own; on the other hand, we might meet someone who can help with a problem we might have. But, however it is, we get the opportunity to learn how to adjust to each other's idiosyncrasies and needs. A respectful consideration for fellow sevadars and a spirit of teamwork is what the Master wants from us all, without regard to the level at which we are conducting our assigned tasks. In the Master's eyes, all seva has equal importance.

When we visit the Dera we have a golden opportunity to see the true meaning of selfless seva. The langar is just one of the many locations where we witness seva's dynamic action, and observe the total dedication to the Master. Though the work is hard, in hot and crowded conditions, hundreds of men and women labour all hours of day and night to prepare food to feed the masses, joy and love shining from their eyes.

So what is the mark of a true sevadar? The Master is the best example of that. Baba Ji, on a daily basis, shows us the real meaning of true service to his Master. He is always cheerful, always ready to take on the task at hand. He never complains or asks why but carries out his Master's wishes without hesitation. Through his example we get to see the correct attitude toward seva. And it is attitude that is the key. It is the crucial element that determines whether what we do is seva or is just another day filled with humdrum activity.

Connecting with the Master

It is through attitude, above all, that we acknowledge the important sense of connection with our Master that seva gives us. Our meditation, of course, supplies that connection, but on another – perhaps more accessible – level, so does physical seva. And that is the answer to the question of why seva is offered to us and what its purpose is. It is to fulfil our need, at the physical level, for that vital connection which then leads to greater commitment to the inner connection. We can begin to see, then, that it is seva that is essential to our development as spiritual beings and not we who are essential to the task.

A loving attitude when carrying out our seva means that the kind of thoughts we have will be that we are doing our assigned task solely to please the Master without any thought of 'me' or 'mine', and without bringing our personal wishes into it. Because seva is precious to us, it is tempting to become possessive: "This is *my* seva – please don't interfere with it!" But the moment the 'I' or 'my' comes in, the purpose of seva is lost.

So is seva really necessary? Should everyone do it? What if the thought crosses our mind that our little contribution might never amount to much? It appears to have such a small impact, why bother?

What if we are just too busy living our lives, raising our children and going to work so that focusing on one more commitment seems beyond our reach? If this is the case, then these words from Maharaj Charan Singh might comfort us:

Seva comes from the heart. It is not a compulsion for anybody – it's not that you have to do it, but you want to do it... The greatest reward in seva is the contentment and happiness that you feel within, that you get an opportunity to serve someone. That is the greatest happiness one can ever get, to make someone happy.

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Whether it is as gardener, technician, builder, administrator, cook, cleaner, or one of the ladies sweeping the street at the Dera with a small hand brush, cleaning the dust and leaves from the road, the Master likes us to participate and is pleased when we do. The love in those ladies' eyes will tell you that they understand the real meaning of that task – an opportunity to please the one they love.

Physical seva paves the way towards meditation, which is in itself a seva. The Master has said that the most important seva we can do is our two and a half hours of daily meditation. Every new dawn brings us an opportunity to join the Master in that most important task of all, and the gift of physical seva is a helping hand towards fulfilling this ultimate seva. How very fortunate and blessed we are.



Don't You Worry Child

As satsangis we may feel the pull of the soul back to its home in Sach Khand. Through our meditation we may have sensed that home through the sound of the Shabd. We feel drawn to the Master and, in his presence, feel some of the love and belonging the soul once felt. There is a plan for us to return, and so, as the Masters tell us time and again, it is pointless to worry. *Don't You Worry Child*, a song popular with millions of young listeners around the globe, describes this:

*There was a time
I used to look into my father's eyes.
In a happy home,
I was a king, I had a golden throne.
Those days are gone,
Now the memory's on the wall.
I hear the songs,
From the places where I was born.*

*Upon a hill across a blue lake,
That's where I had my first heartbreak.
I still remember how it all changed.*

*My father said,
"Don't you worry, don't you worry, child.
See heaven's got a plan for you.
Don't you worry, don't you worry now."*

Steve Angello, Sebastian Ingrosso, John Martin

We could interpret this song in a spiritual context: the idea that our soul's source or "heaven" has a plan resonates strongly with us. We could quite easily imagine ourselves as the lead character in the song and tell the story of our own soul's journey. The song opens with:

*There was a time I used to look into my father's eyes.
In a happy home, I was a king, I had a golden throne.*

These lines could illustrate the soul's memories of Sach Khand, the highest realm of truth and purity. This is where the soul lived in eternal bliss, merged with the Father or the Shabd.

We could read into the next lines the soul's perspective from this earthly plane:

*Those days are gone,
Now the memory's on the wall.
I hear the songs,
From the places where I was born.*

Those happy days in Sach Khand might be temporarily over for the soul, due to its descent to this plane, but this doesn't mean that all is lost. The soul can still "hear the songs", that melodious music from where it was born.

Saints tell us, over and over again, of the divine sound current, the Shabd that resounds within each of us. How beautiful it is that we are all composed of this sound!

We can hear this sound through the practice of Surat Shabd Yoga, as instructed by the Master at the time of initiation. Even if we are not initiated and we are seekers, the sound is still there, resounding within us.

When we are initiated, we are placed back in touch with that divine

sound through our meditation and we can start to make our way back home. We can attempt to walk the path of the Masters.

We can continue to trace the soul's journey in the lines:

*Upon a hill across a blue lake,
That's where I had my first heartbreak.
I still remember how it all changed.*

The hill and blue lake, familiar to us in earthly scenery, could also be symbolic of Sach Khand, the highest realm of consciousness, and the heartbreak could relate to the soul's descent to the earthly plane. Our present Master, Baba Ji, frequently tells us that our soul is one drop of that divine ocean of Shabd and asks us to question how a drop can be happy without the ocean.

These lines could describe the soul's sadness at leaving the ocean of bliss and falling to earth, where it got caught in the field of karmas and rebirth. Our souls have been languishing on this plane for a long time, entering rebirth after rebirth through 8.4 million species. We have forgotten our home or heaven, but at last we are starting to remember it. The Adi Granth tell us that eventually the soul will turn homeward:

*For myriads of births have I been separated from you O Lord;
This birth is dedicated to you.
Pinning my hopes on you I live, sayeth Ravidas,
it is long since I have had a vision of you.*

Quoted in *Guru Ravidas: The Philosopher's Stone*

Once we are initiated we can sometimes become disheartened and feel like giving up. We are faced with multiple obstacles in this field of karmas, which can be "heartbreak" moments for us on our spiritual

journey. The way can be tiresome. We lose hope and begin to worry about our family, relationships, finances, education, work, health – the list is endless. When we try to meditate, the mind wanders under the pressure of our problems. How can we motivate ourselves to keep going and not give up? How can we hear the divine, happy songs of home again? In *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh writes:

Put all your worries aside because there is nothing higher than meditation. Increase the duration of your practice from day to day, never decrease it; always keep this in your mind.

This assurance that there is nothing in this world that is higher than our meditation is extremely comforting. There is no problem in our life that is bigger than our meditation. If we keep this reassurance in our hearts and at the core of our meditation practice, we will surely be successful spiritual warriors and make our way home.

Similarly, in the chorus of the song, we read the lines:

*My Father said,
“Don’t you worry, don’t you worry, child.
See heaven’s got a plan for you.
Don’t you worry, don’t you worry now.”*

All things in this world are impermanent yet we believe them to be real. We get lost for a while in relationships with friends, family, colleagues and so on. And when these relationships come to an end, we can be devastated. This plays on our minds and keeps us from sitting in meditation or from pursuing life as a seeker.

In *Legacy of Love*, Maharaj Charan Singh states:

Life itself is very simple. And our needs are very simple in this creation. We complicate our needs by our requirements. We create problems at every step and then try to solve them.

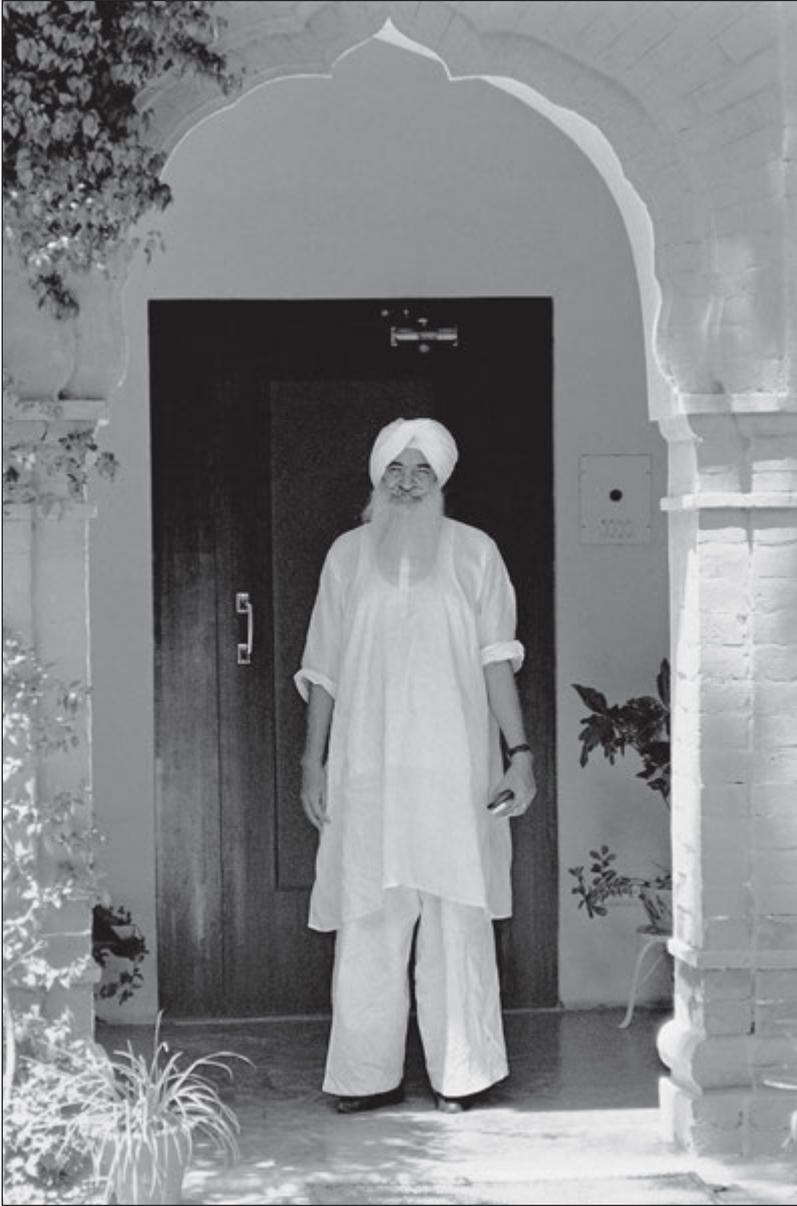
Complicating our lives, we become entangled in this karmic web. Only attention to the Master's message of calm and detachment will deliver us. The Masters in their infinite wisdom tell us that our lives exist due to a combination of good and bad karmas. Therefore, throughout our lives we will experience various situations and relationships both good and bad, as these are the outcomes of our past actions.

The most reassuring message is that throughout all of these experiences, however disturbing, we still have a friend. That friend is our one and only true friend in this world and the next, our Sat Guru, who guides us according to the divine plan laid out for us. He guides us with the highest love and compassion and in the full knowledge of what is best for our soul's development. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

If you try to pick up the thorns of the world, you can never succeed, but if you put strong shoes on your feet, no thorns will bother you. Similarly, we can never solve the problems of this world, but we can always rise above them.

Therefore, as initiates undertaking a minimum of two and a half hours meditation practice every day, and with the Master's grace, we have some hope of getting back in touch with the sound current again and finding our way home.

If we listen with love to the teachings of our present Master, Baba Ji, read the scriptures of the saints and keep love in our hearts where the Master ultimately lives, then, because the Lord does have a plan for us, we will surely find a way back home to Sach Khand, the land of eternal bliss.



Maharaj Charan Singh

Light a Candle

Q. Maharaj Ji, sometimes in meditation ideas come, and I leave meditation to write them down. Is that wrong? That seems to be the most wonderful time for inspiration.

A. Well, either you can attend to meditation or you can attend to your problems and inspiration. You can't have both. It's because at the time of meditation, the mind is a little concentrated. So we can get a lot of inspiration, and we can think very clearly. The more the mind is concentrated, the more clearly you can think and solve a problem or analyze that issue... You see, actually we waste too much of our time thinking about all these things at the time of meditation. We should attend to meditation. Meditation is nothing but seeking the solution to all these problems which are tying us down to this creation. Meditation helps us to detach from all the problems of this creation. That is a positive approach, rather than trying to find every little answer to every little problem. If you sit for a couple of hours, and for one and a half hours you are just talking to yourself, then the mind won't become still. It rushes out with all the questions, all the worries, all the problems. Leave those to the Lord to deal with. Just attend to meditation. Because your thinking is not going to solve any problem at all – it will rather complicate it. If you brush the problems aside and attend to meditation, solutions automatically will be there.

Q. When we're doing meditation and our mind wants to run out, should we reprimand it as we would a naughty child, or should we feel like we're in battle?

A. Just try to bring it back to the eye centre. What is the sense of reprimanding it? Your mind will run out again. You will accuse the mind, the mind will accuse you – either way, you are projecting. Then you start talking to yourself. The mind projects in so many ways – it becomes the accused, it becomes the complainant. So bring it back into the simran, bring it back, bring it back.

Q. If during meditation a negative thought keeps coming up, should we use energy to suppress it? Or should we let it run through and just try to get back to meditation?

A. No, suppressing it is not the way to keep it out – it will just come back more vigorously. Keep out the thought by putting your mind in a positive direction. Keep your mind in simran. There is only one mind. If it is busy in simran, if it is absolutely absorbed in simran, other thoughts automatically will go. They'll vanish, they'll fade out. If, without doing simran, you try to eliminate them by thinking, "I'm not going to think; I'm not going to think," you can never succeed. Put your mind in a positive direction; think about something positive. That is simran. When your mind is absorbed in that, other thoughts will automatically vanish. There's no other way to keep them out.

Q. Master, when we have a strong thought about a situation, is there any way to eradicate that or to lessen its effect?

A. I can tell you a positive thing. Instead of worrying about eliminating that thought, attach yourself to the sound within and you will automatically rise above the thought. It's very difficult to eliminate thoughts one by one. It's impossible. But when we attach ourselves

to the Shabd and Nam within, all these thoughts are automatically eliminated. Instead of cursing the darkness, we should light a candle.

Q. I have two related questions about simran. How does mechanical simran get turned into simran with love and devotion? And does it help to try to repeat the words with love and devotion if you're not feeling it?

A. Brother, first we have to start mechanically. Attending to simran with love and devotion means love and devotion for the Master. And his instruction is to attend to your simran. We try to do what pleases our beloved, and we try to abstain from what doesn't please our beloved. Wherever there is love, there's also a fear of offending. It's not fear, it's a fear of offending. That's a part of love. We love them so much that we can't afford to offend them. That is also an expression of love. So if you love the Master, you want to please him and you would not do anything which displeases him. He's pleased with our meditation. So we attend to our meditation with love, we don't abstain from our meditation. We don't turn our back to meditation because that may displease him. And we can't afford to displease him because we love him. So this meditation creates love. It strengthens love. Love grows by meditation and grows to the extent that we become one with the Father.

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Feeling Funny

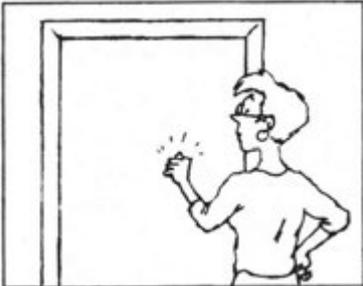
Working it out



*Fred, a keen disciple,
Would have liked to get ahead.*



*His family weren't so keen
And made it clear in what they said:*



*"Fred, we've asked you many times
To mend the garden shed."*



*Then Fred remembered good advice
In Sant Mat books he'd read:*



*It's hands to work, it's duty done
But simran in the head.*

An Everyday Mystic

Evelyn Underhill is probably best known as the author of the book *Mysticism*, a classic exploration of mystic experience as recorded by Christian mystics throughout the centuries. However, she also has much to offer spiritual seekers in terms of inspiration and practical advice which relate clearly to modern times.

In fact, the life of Underhill herself gives encouragement and inspiration to the modern householder, both men and women, trying to balance worldly demands and duties with the duty to oneself of striving to find that spiritual core or essence within.

Evelyn Underhill lived in the early twentieth-century, leading what may seem a pretty ‘normal’, average life. She worked hard and did well in her education, coming to be one of the first women to lecture on theology in a British university, and also becoming theological editor of *The Spectator* magazine. Underhill married her childhood sweetheart who was not drawn, as she was, to spirituality, but equally had no objection. Unusual for the time, she was able to continue in her career as a married woman, so was balancing both work and marriage with her growing focus upon spiritual practice. She became more and more interested by the writings of Christian mystics, and it is clear from her own writing that she herself meditated daily; there is that unmistakable, inspirational turn of phrase that lights up her words.

So the reader here and now – similarly attempting to follow the advice of mystics to combine spirituality with a normal householder’s life – can see the relevance and potential help to be found from her writings. The extracts taken here are from a small volume delightfully entitled, *Practical Mysticism – A Little Volume for Normal People*.

Those already embarked upon a spiritual path will recognize how practical accomplished mystics are. Practicality is both an outcome

and prerequisite of spiritual practice. Through their focus, mystics perceive in the blink of an eye those actions which will take them forward, and those which will not. Furthermore, through experience and practice, they see clearly how short the time is for spiritual seekers to mend their ways and progress to their goal of true understanding and awareness. Thus their advice *can* only be intensely practical – there is no time for doubt or shilly shallying!

Further, the title emphasizes that the volume is for “normal” people. Do we not believe that we ourselves are ‘normal’, or at least would like to think so? So often, especially in modern times, there is the prevailing, but rarely expressed view that spirituality is only for ‘abnormal’ people – for the few destined to live out their lives in retreat in a monastery or nunnery. What a relief to discover that it is fine, and ‘normal’ indeed, to have some inkling of a spiritual dimension within oneself, and to feel drawn to explore that.

Thus in many ways Underhill was ahead of her time. Through this volume she addresses ordinary people in readily accessible language, asking questions from the sceptic’s point of view. This perspective, in association with her warm empathy, will be recognized as characteristic of the practising mystic. Underhill examines the question of what mysticism is and explores the nature of reality, meditation, love and Christian spiritual experience. The following extracts give a flavour of the eventual heights and joys of the mystic experience:

Hitherto, all that you have attained has been – or at least seemed to you – the direct result of your own hard work. A difficult self-discipline, the slowly achieved control of your vagrant thoughts and desires, the steady daily practice of recollection, a diligent pushing out of your consciousness from the superficial to the fundamental, an unselfish loving

attention; all this has been rewarded by the gradual broadening and deepening of your perceptions, by an initiation into the movements of a larger life. You have been a knocker, a seeker, an asker: have beat upon the Cloud of Unknowing “with a sharp dart of longing love.” A perpetual effort of will has characterized your inner development.

But then Underhill uses an analogy taken from Saint Teresa of Avila to explain how a change occurs – from what seems to be one’s own hard work to a helplessness, in which all is taken out of one’s hands. Saint Teresa describes how one has been watering a garden – a very time-consuming process, but with a certain result – until the watering can is taken away, and the gardener has to rely upon the rain. Underhill explains that this is

more generous, more fruitful, than anything which your own efforts could manage, but, in its incalculable visitations utterly beyond your control. Here all one can say is this: that if you acquiesce in the heroic demands which the spiritual life now makes upon you, if you let yourself go, eradicate the last traces of self-interest even of the most spiritual kind – then, you have established conditions under which the forces of the spiritual world can work on you, heightening your susceptibilities, deepening and purifying your attention, so that you are able to taste and feel more and more of the inexhaustible riches of Reality.

So with ongoing effort in one’s spiritual practice, Underhill describes how it is possible to come to a point at which seekers can

truly 'let go' and place themselves in God's hands, simply to experience all the joys within. She writes:

Thus dying to your own will, waiting for what is given, infused, you will presently find that a change in your apprehension has indeed taken place: that those who said self-loss was the only way to realization taught no pious fiction but the truth.

Then everything has come to fruition; everything that the seeker trusted and hoped for is indeed found to be the case – the ultimate truth and reality. There is no need to worry or even strive – the seeker is on the brink of experiencing total, unsurpassable, complete love, support and understanding. Underhill expresses it beautifully, in a way that only one with experience could:

Suddenly you know it to be instinct with a movement and life too great for you to apprehend. You are thrilled by a mighty energy, uncontrolled by you, unsolicited by you: its higher vitality is poured into your soul. You enter upon an experience for which all the terms of power, thought, motion, even of love, are inadequate: yet which contains within itself the only expression of all these things. Your strength is now made perfect in weakness: because of the completeness of your dependence, a fresh life is infused into you, such as your old separate existence never knew.

Thus the seeker, or practitioner, understands this reality by instinct and experience, rather than as a verbal concept, and this understanding gives new life and utter joy:

Those ineffective, half-conscious attempts towards free action, clear apprehension, true union, which we dignify by the names of will, thought and love, are now seen matched by an Absolute Will, Thought, and Love; instantly recognized by the contemplating spirit as the highest reality it has yet known, and evoking in it a passionate and humble joy.

These words give us just a taste of Underhill's approach and wisdom, and a reminder of the delights to come – which, as a result of focus and faithful effort in meditation can be ours.



So blissful are those transcendent realms that if we once come to know of them, all of us would fly to those spiritual planes; but alas, we know them not. And they cannot be known by intellect or reason. Only through actual mystic realization can we get an insight into mystic knowledge, only through actual mystic transport and ecstasy can we have a peep into the hidden realms of transcendent reality.

Mystics realize God, know him, and enter the rare essence of his being; but describe him they cannot, for there are no suitable words.

Mysticism The Spiritual Path

Saint John and the Partridge

It is very easy to get the wrong impression of spiritual life, and to suffer a great deal as a consequence in the attempt to mould ourselves to our own ideas of what it means to be spiritual. The intensity of focus on the divine Beloved has to come naturally from within and cannot be forced. Decorating the kennel does not improve the character of the dog.

Often, we harbour inaccurate preconceptions of what a mystic or spiritual person should be like – perhaps sitting cross-legged on a couch making awesome pronouncements about the Infinite, or some other image from our imagination and cultural conditioning. But the reality is that truly spiritual people are normal – more normal than most of us, in fact, for they have brought their mind and emotions under control. They are not rigid, intolerant or dry, nor are they overbearing or even superior in their demeanour. They are perceptive, warm-hearted, human, approachable, and invariably have a great sense of humour. Their humility is not unctuous, self-conscious or an act, but natural. It comes from an accurate perception of their genuine insignificance before God. The story of *Saint John and the Partridge*, quoted here from *The Apocryphal New Testament*, illustrates this:

It is said that the most blessed evangelist John, when he was gently stroking a partridge with his hands, suddenly saw a man in the garb of a hunter coming towards him. The hunter, wondering how a man of such repute and fame could demean himself with such small and humble amusements, said, "Are you that John whose eminent and widespread fame has induced a great desire in me also to know you? Why then are you occupied with such simple amusements?"

The blessed John said to him, "What are you carrying in your hands?"

"A bow," said he.

"And why," said John, "do you not carry it about always stretched?"

He answered him, "I must not, lest by constant bending, the strength of its vigour be dissipated, and it grow soft and useless. Then when there is need that the arrows be shot with great force at some beast, the strength being lost by excess of continual tension, a powerful blow cannot be dealt."

"Just so," said the blessed John, "let not this little and brief relaxation of my mind offend you, young man. For unless, by some diversion, it sometimes eases and relaxes the force of its tension, it will grow slack through unbroken rigour, and will not be able to obey the power of the Spirit."

John points out that there is nothing wrong with the simple amusements of life. They are all a part of being truly human. In fact, they lend balance to a spiritual life, for the mind and body require some form of innocent relaxation from time to time. Spiritual life is not helped by going to extremes, in either direction. Moderation in everything lends grace to life.

John Davidson, *The Prodigal Soul*





Maharaj Sawan Singh

*With your irresistible glance,
you captured my heart and soul.*

*Having robbed me of those,
take away my name and accomplishments too.*

*If any trace of me remains in this world,
please, don't delay – take that too.*

'Ayn al-Qudat Hamadani, Love's Alchemy

I Trust You, Baba Ji ... Don't I?

Many of us, if asked how we've come to follow this spiritual path, have varied and wondrous stories of how we were brought to our Master's door. Here we are, all with a level of belief, perhaps of love. Our choice was thorough and conscientious – we diligently sought him out, standing and knocking at his door so that he could open it to us. We then took a step inside and have thus begun a relationship of great depth. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh discusses the part that faith plays before we even start our spiritual journey. He says:

Before you start, you must have intellectual faith, because without intellectual faith, you will not start ... First we have to build intellectual faith in the philosophy. And in light of the philosophy, we have to weigh the Master.

As with every relationship, there is an initial meeting at which we may feel attracted to certain qualities in the other as we gradually get to know him. But it's only through experience, through the different circumstances and events in our lives, that we start to trust our friend, and a bond develops. Baba Ji has often remarked that we see the Master as many things – we see him as a guide, as a father, as a friend. If we see him as a friend, then we can go to him with anything, we can talk to him about anything. In some types of relationship there may be restrictions, but between friends there is trust and openness.

Let's reflect on this a little more deeply. Are we talking here about a comfortable relationship with the physical form of the Master or about that relationship with the Radiant Form of our Master? Although initially it may help to have a comfort level on this physical plane,

eventually we must all graduate and give attention to developing that spiritual bond with our inner friend; we have to re-establish that link, that awakening of our soul to its source.

Once a relationship with our Master has begun, we go through many ups and downs before we trust him completely. Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

Faith has to start with the mind. Without faith in the mind you cannot experience the faith of the soul. Soul always has faith in the Father. It is the mind which is holding it back.

The Master describes our growing faith as a natural process:

Faith is not in your hands at all. It comes from within. Love creates faith. The more love you have, the more faith you will have in the person concerned. And faith enables you to practise. Love will create faith, and faith will create practice.

Maharaj Ji here is referring to our spiritual practice, the practice of meditation. He continues:

Meditation will be able to create that faith. It generates faith, it creates faith, it strengthens faith. Faith grows by meditation.

The Master then likens our deepening spiritual faith to the confidence we might build up during a car journey to somewhere we have only heard about but never visited. After we start the journey, we gradually get signs along the way that build up our confidence. This experience gives us the inspiration to continue our journey with

enthusiasm, and finally reach our goal. He says that “actual faith will come only when you reach the destination”.

In order for our soul to reach its destination, we have to let go of the analysis and calculation of the mind; and to achieve this, we have the greatest tool our Master could ever have given us – simran. The process of mentally letting go and allowing the simran to take over is rather like a child standing on a table; the father says “jump” but the child is hesitant and scared. Similarly, in our spiritual journey, the mind is afraid. It doesn’t want to leave behind the comfort of incessant thought, doesn’t want to take its attention away from its close entanglement with the physical body. But the father encourages the child and says, “I won’t let you fall. Jump! I promise that I’ll be here to catch you.” The child jumps, the father catches the child and holds the child to his chest in a tight hug. The child feels safe and warm; and, overwhelmingly, the child knows that by letting go, the trust is complete. Similarly, when we are at the threshold of piercing the veil within, when our soul is at the brink of flying free, we have to take that leap and let go of absolutely everything, trusting him to be there.

In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh is asked, “Christ said that if we had faith we could move mountains – what did he mean by that?” And he very beautifully replies:

*With your faith you can move the creator of the mountains,
what to say of mountains.... By your faith in him, you can move
him. You can become him. If you become him, you can move
anything.*

How often have we heard Baba Ji tell us that he has more faith in us than we have in ourselves? If it were not possible for us to do our meditation and thus complete our spiritual journey, he would not have

initiated us. He is confident that we are capable of achieving spiritual realization and that we can do it here and now.

Many years ago someone asked Baba Ji, “What do you see when you look at us?” And Baba Ji, in the most profound way, answered that he saw one hundred percent potential.

Surely we should embrace his faith in us?

In the book, *The Faith to Doubt – Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*, Stephen Batchelor quotes the twentieth-century poet, T. S. Eliot:

*I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing;
Wait without love, for love would be love of the wrong thing;
There is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not yet ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be light, and the stillness the dancing.*

Stephen Batchelor also talks about “the Zen tradition often having three factors that need to be cultivated along the path: great doubt, great faith, great courage.” He writes:

Doubt in this context does not refer to the kind of wavering indecision in which we get stuck, preventing any positive movement. It means to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our life, to acknowledge that fundamentally we do not know what is going on ...

Faith is not equivalent to mere belief. Faith is the condition of ultimate confidence that we have the capacity to follow the path of doubt (of not knowing, still trusting and letting go), to its end. And courage, courage is the strength needed to be true to

ourselves under all conditions, to cast aside the obstacles that are constantly thrown in our way.

We need to be open to what the spiritual path brings us. It is sometimes not what we expect, hence the relevance of T. S. Eliot's observation that we have a tendency to love or hope for the "wrong thing", and that we need to wait without even thought, "so the darkness shall be light".

There may be doubt in our journey, which is all par for the course, but with courage and perseverance, and of course – most important – his grace, we can develop complete faith in him.

We start our journey with a degree of belief, and then – strengthening the bond with our Friend and developing love and trust along the way – in time we realize that the faith, like his grace, is always there. It's like seeing the pieces of a puzzle all jumbled up. But as we move forward on our spiritual journey the pieces come together so that eventually we see the entire picture. It is the growing awareness of his love that makes this happen.

So, do I trust you, Baba Ji? Yes, I do!

The final word goes to Rumi:

*In your light I learn how to love
In your beauty, how to make poems*

*You dance inside my chest, where no one can see you,
But sometimes I do, and that sight becomes this art.*

The Love Poems of Rumi, ed. Deepak Chopra

Close By

*You, neighbour god, if sometimes in the night
I rouse you with loud knocking,
it is because I rarely hear you breathe,
though know: you're in your room alone.
And should you need a drink, no one is there
to reach it to you, groping in the dark.
But I am listening. Just give me a sign.
I am close by.*

*Only a thin wall lies between us,
mere happenstance; for it would take
only a call from your lips or from mine
to break it down
without a sound.*

The wall is builded of your pictures.

*They stand before you hiding you like names.
And when the light within me blazes high
– that in my inmost soul I know you by –
the radiance is wasted on their frames.*

*And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,
exiled from you, must go their homeless ways.*

Rainer Maria Rilke

Faith or Folly

The Masters come with many messages to help us out of the illusion in which we find ourselves. They teach us that our belief in this illusory world leads us into negative thoughts and actions, many of which are sheer folly. And the Masters repeat their messages because we are slow learners and our habits have such a firm grip on our thinking and behaviour. When we start out on this spiritual path, we are not fully aware of how much work it will entail. We don't realize how often we will fall short of the mark; how many times we will stumble, pick ourselves up, look sheepishly at God, and set out once more on our endeavour.

After a while we realize the enormity of the journey we have undertaken. We may have made some progress, but with every step we take, we seem to realize how much farther we have to go.

Fortunately, our Master is always beside us. He is the one who pulled us to the path. We all have our individual stories about how this happened, all of them a miracle of his grace. He singled us out and set out to rescue us from returning to this cycle of karmas time and again. He set out to lead us into the blissful state of Sach Khand.

He saw that we were asleep, and that we had forgotten our real home. He saw that we had become identified with our minds and bodies, which were given to us only to exist on these lower planes. He saw that we actually thought that we were our minds and bodies and that we had almost completely forgotten about the soul and how to get in touch with it.

But he also saw that we were ready to begin the journey. He knew that it was time for us to be awakened from our illusory dream. He tried to shake us awake as if he were saying, "Wake up! You are not who you think you are. The person you think you are is just a puppet

in a play. This world isn't real. You've been living in a dream. Read these books, attend these satsangs, listen to these CDs, and learn about reality. Then you will go on to experience the joy of that reality for yourself."

This initial process of awakening might have taken a while for us. It might have started from some kind of suffering, or from a feeling of emptiness or longing, as though something were missing in our life. We might have looked into other paths before we came to Sant Mat. But eventually the pull from the Master and his teachings became very strong. We started to feel love for the Master – and faith. This again was his grace. The Christian mystic, Meister Eckhart, wrote:

*The seed of God is in us.
Now the seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree,
And a hazel tree grows into a hazel tree.
A seed of God grows into God.*

If we were lucky enough to actually see the Master, our love greatly increased, and eventually the pull became so strong we couldn't resist it. Then we became initiated and our real journey began.

Masters sometimes refer to this path as a struggle. We have so many deep-seated habits accumulated over lifetimes, many of which are not positive. Our mind has been the dominating force for so long that we think we are the mind; we identify with it and we think we are in control, through our mind.

The mind is constantly chattering away about that all important story: 'the story of me'. The mind enhances and embellishes this story, trying to give reality to the personality it thinks of as 'me'. It feels insecure and needy and so builds elaborate schemes for the future, talking to itself about becoming more successful in its job, better established financially, and superior to, or at least as good as, those around it.

The mind also chatters away to itself about past experiences of ‘me’ – about how intelligent, successful, lovable, hard-working, witty and kind ‘me’ has been. It chatters about how many acquisitions ‘me’ has, which are so much bigger, better, more tasteful, more expensive than any other ‘me’ has acquired. It chatters about how many friends ‘me’ has (and this can run into very large figures if Facebook is included). It also experiences the fear of losing these acquisitions and friends, and worries about how to hang on to them. As the mystics agree, the life of the *manmukh* is all about ‘me’ and ‘mine’.

Alternatively, the mind might make a different kind of story for ‘me’. It might be related to this quotation from the *Dhammapada*, (a collection of aphorisms that illustrate the Buddhist moral system). It says:

*He insulted me, he hurt me, he defeated me, he robbed me,
Those who think such thoughts will not be free from hate.*

The mind might make up the story of the pitied and pitiful personality who is hard done by. This is the ‘poor me’ story, and the mind which tells it can be full of resentment, complaints, judgement, jealousy and back-biting. The truth is that most personalities are made up from all of these kinds of characteristics: the egotistical and the attention-seeking, the morose and self-pitying.

The main point about these different stories of ‘me’ is that they would have us believe that the story is real, and by doing that, we waste our time thinking about the past and future. But these are illusory concepts, interpreted by vastly different perceptions, interpretations and recollections. Only the present moment is real. The present moment is the only place where we can practise the presence of God. It’s the only moment where we can actually become God-realized and experience reality. And when we have experienced glimpses of that,

then we can start to take on more divine, positive characteristics, such as, joy, peace, forgiveness, humility, inclusiveness, kindness, and so on. The Hindu scriptures tell us, ‘Those who know Brahm, become Brahm.’

But this mind of ours is so convinced of its own reality that it thinks it is the ‘doer.’ The following folk tale illustrates our folly:

A young man was going on a journey to visit his new inlaws for the first time. He was travelling on a horse, which was carrying a great deal of luggage. It was an extremely humid, hot day, and this young man started to feel very sorry about the horse’s heavy load.

So he thought of a way of relieving the horse from its misery. He climbed down and started taking the luggage off the horse. Then he tied it all to his own body and, as if he were loading a donkey, put other things on his head and carried still more in his hands. Then he climbed back on the horse. He thought to himself, “I feel even more hot and uncomfortable now, but at least the horse will be happy!” The journey continued and the young man became more hot and tired as the day progressed.

Finally, he reached the house of his inlaws and was so tired he went straight to sleep.

After the young man had rested, he explained why he had been so tired. His father-in-law was astonished. “Why did you load the luggage onto yourself and then climb on the horse? The horse was still carrying the same weight as before, but you were carrying all the weight of the luggage and making yourself unnecessarily exhausted and uncomfortable! The horse was perfectly strong and capable of carrying the luggage by himself!”

This is our unfortunate situation. Our mind thinks that it is the doer. It makes plans and thinks it is doing everything. It gets stressed and exhausted in sorting out the plans, then when they don’t work, it becomes even more exhausted and stressed in trying to make

them work. All we really have to do is strengthen our faith and then surrender to the will of the Lord. God has the best plan, and the power to put it into action. Marianne Williamson, in her book *A Return to Love*, has written that we only have to remember two things, “One: God’s plan works. Two: ours doesn’t.”

So, we have to try to be vigilant in what the Masters call our fight with the mind. We must be vigilant in our day-to-day life and in our meditation. When we meditate we must disassociate from our mind. With the help of simran, we have to concentrate at the eye centre, bring our attention there, and so lift the vital current from the part of the body below the eyes. Then we must hold our attention at the eye centre by making contact with the astral form of the Master. And finally we must allow our soul to rise up by attaching it to the Shabd. There is no place for the mind’s activity in any of this. In *Spiritual Gems*, Maharaj Sawan Singh says:

As long as we haven’t freed our attention from mind and matter and come inside the eye focus, or made contact with the Astral Form, and thereby cast off our I-ness, we are not accepted by the sound current. As long as we are encased in the body, with the attention working in the nine portals of the body, we are worldly and of this world. As long as we are encased in I-ness, we are not of the Master.

All of this, of course, is an enormous task. It can be the work of more than one lifetime, but the Masters try to encourage us to achieve it in one. It takes effort, perseverance, determination, dedication and, of course, faith. If we pursue the spiritual goal we will abandon our follies and experience reality in this life: joy, peace, love and bliss – all the attributes of God.

Something to Think About

The Honest Disciple

Once a rabbi decided to test the honesty of his disciples, so he called them together and posed a question.

“What would you do if you were walking along and found a purse full of money lying in the road?” he asked.

“I’d return it to its owner,” said one disciple.

His answer comes so quickly, I must wonder if he really means it, the rabbi thought. “I’d keep the money if nobody saw me find it,” said another.

He has a frank tongue, but a wicked heart, the rabbi told himself.

“Well, Rabbi,” said a third disciple, “to be honest, I believe I’d be tempted to keep it. So I would pray to God that he give me the strength to resist such temptation and do the right thing.”

Aha! thought the rabbi. Here is the man I would trust.

The Book of Virtues, ed. William J Bennett

While the truthful man is fearless and has no qualms or hesitation, an untruthful man is always afraid and never looks anybody in the face.... One who is truthful and contented and speaks the truth is dear to the Lord. He never suffers separation from him. Truth has nothing to fear.

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



Invisible Strings

I wonder if you are familiar with the story of *Pinocchio*, or perhaps the Disney movie of that name? For those who may not know it, it's the story of a string puppet aspiring to become a real boy. The technical name for this kind of puppet is a marionette, and marionettes are used to delight audiences in theatre and television. Basically the marionette is a three-dimensional figure moved by strings or wires attached to its hands and legs. These strings are controlled from above by a puppeteer who, with the help of a wooden cross-piece, stages the marionette's movements.

By now you've probably guessed where we're heading! Through this metaphor we're going to illustrate our situation as humans in God's vast play of life. The entertainment venue, be it theatre or opera house, represents life itself and we living creatures are the marionettes, activated from above by the Lord.

The puppet appears to have a life of its own, but of course we know that it is the puppeteer who activates it. We understand this so clearly when we're talking about a puppet, but somehow when it comes to our situation in the human body, we fail to accept it. The saints emphasize the reality, reminding us that our real self is part and parcel of the Lord and warning us not to confuse this temporary body with that true identity. We've often heard the present Master say that the reality is that we're spiritual beings going through a human experience – not human beings going through a spiritual experience. However, we spend so many hours in close contact with the world that we find it extremely hard not to believe in this illusionary creation and our own supposed ability to manipulate it. We get so easily immersed in our day-to-day issues that we fail to remember that we're simply part of a show. The saints look over the whole show from a much higher level;

they observe us getting lost in the play of life and come to remind us of the need to put things into perspective.

Let's accept, then, that we're part of a colourful illusion, playing our roles as puppets on the stage of the world. Then let's look a bit further: the most important feature of string-puppets is precisely the strings they're hanging from. These strings run up to the control rods which – unless we have a perfect Master who has promised to take us home – are in the hands of the power that rules the lower part of creation. Here's where the big 'but' comes in. As followers of a spiritual path, from the moment we are initiated, our Master claims these strings back from Kal, the negative power, and personally takes them over. In *Call of the Great Master* we read of Maharaj Sawan Singh who tells a group of seekers:

“Listen: Initiation by a true Master means something more than merely teaching the method of repeating the holy names or of hearing the holy Sound. At the time of the initiation the Master unties the dori (the cord or string) of the disciple's soul, which binds it to Kal, and attaches it to the Satguru inside.”

What amazing grace! Billions of God's 'marionettes' perform in the play of life and we're amongst the few whose strings have been released from the dance of the world. Just like Pinocchio, we're amongst those very fortunate beings who can aspire to realize our true identity.

Once we understand that the marionette's part is being guided by the Master, we can rest assured that everything, every detail of our lives, is managed from above according to his divine plan. How then can we doubt any circumstance of our lives, be it poverty, ill health or family troubles? Every movement we make is known to the Master, so we can be sure that his will prevails. Let's do our best to stand up

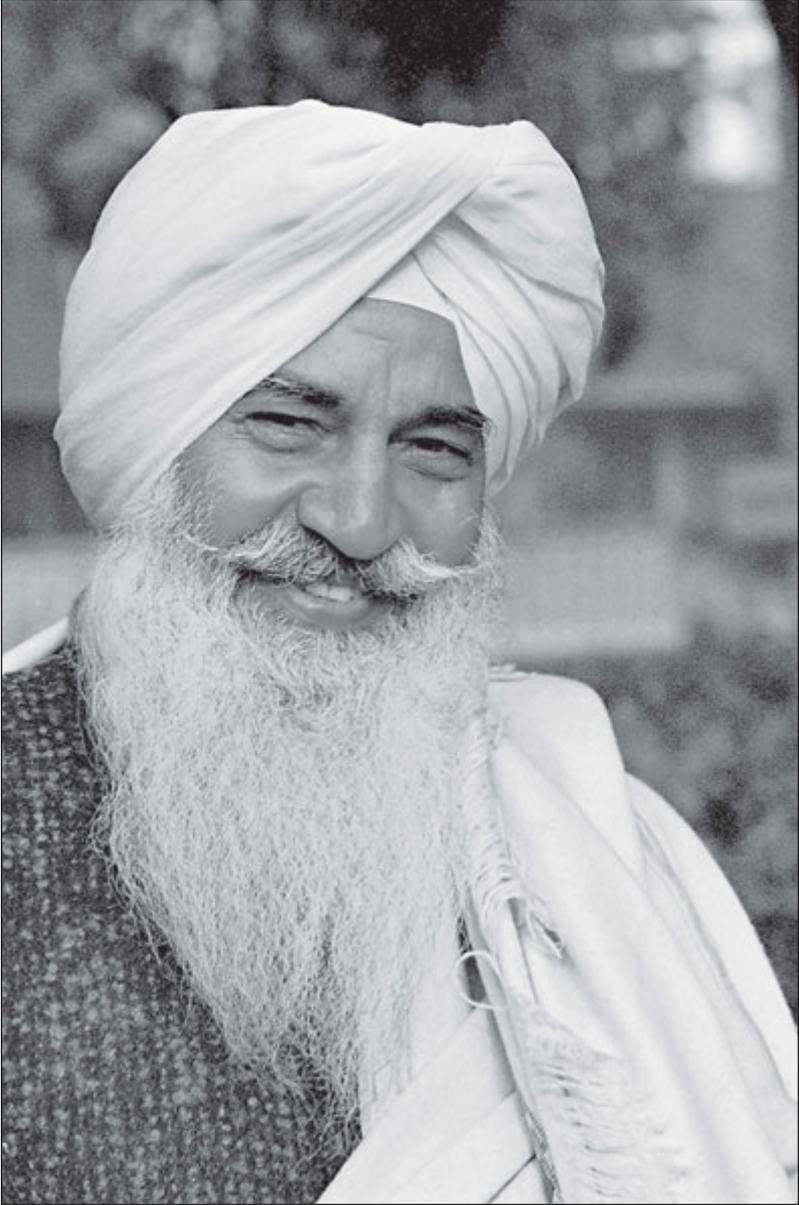
straight, but if we fall, let's patiently wait for him to pick us up. He'll only give us as much as he knows we can handle. Sometimes, as marionettes, we get ourselves tangled up and in a mess, but if this happens we can trust that he will gently lift us and disentangle our strings.

Let us always remember that the more strings a marionette has, the wider the range of movements a puppeteer can achieve. We have strings that prompt us to physical action and ensure that we work, rest and play on this stage of the world. But as satsangis we also have strings – those vital connections – that help us remember the Lord, meditate, do seva, be helpful to our companions. The more we are responsive to these strings, the better we perform. The best thing we can do as God's dancing puppets is to leave the strings of our life in his care – dance but leave them loose for him to handle. Tugging at them will only make his job harder. Let us not forget that our skilled puppeteer master is seeing the big picture from above, which we can't hope to understand from our level. All we have to do for our part is to place absolute faith in our Master and just let go.



*When the perfect Master I met
All my worries were driven away;
He made my soul immaculate,
Now he is ever at my side.*

Kabir, The Weaver of God's Name



Maharaj Charan Singh

No More Talk

*The time for writing poems
has gone away.
I saw the Poet himself,
he passed my way.*

*And every soul that caught his shining eye
became a poem himself,
so that is why
the time for writing poems has long gone by.*

The verse above was composed by someone like you or me, an onlooker, as someone very special passed by. And he found the experience so intense that after it he was quite lost for words.

We generally love to express ourselves, whether through a phone call, text, tweet or Facebook entry or by commemorating something more permanently through poetry or a piece of descriptive writing. Words are very important to us; through them we let others know our thoughts and feelings; through them we listen to the thoughts and feelings of others, participating in a shared culture.

Consider the part that words played in introducing us to Sant Mat – the satsangs that we attended, the conversation and advice of fellow travellers on the path, the inspiring Question & Answer sessions with the Master that we may have been lucky enough to attend; maybe we have been one of those who formulated a question, reached the microphone, and expressed the feelings of their heart to the Master. All this, we are able to enjoy because we're human and we have at our disposal that blessed tool, words!

However, the writer of this verse says that the time for writing poems (in other words, for expressing ourselves) has gone by. The reason is that “the Poet” has come. “Poet” is being used as a term for the living Master, God’s representative on earth, and the experience of seeing the Poet walking amongst us is a life-changing event.

We do not always realize just how life-changing the Master’s darshan is. Sometimes we are mentally focused, sometimes not, and the recognizable effect of the Master’s presence depends upon our receptivity. But whether we are conscious of it or not, that meeting with a Master is of huge significance. Kabir says:

*The Master is the philosopher’s stone.
Approach him with humility and care;
He is the burning candle
to which neighbours come
to light their candles from its flame.*

A philosopher’s stone reputedly had the power to change base metals into gold and was used by alchemists in the Middle Ages in the attempt to effect such changes. In calling the Master the philosopher’s stone, Kabir is telling us that the Master has the power to change the spiritual condition of human beings from base metal – bound by ties of mind and body – into gold, that is, pure soul, released from this bondage. He is also a “candle”, lovingly described as lighting other candles “from its flame”. The Master is our inspiration, lending something of his own pure energy to everyone who encounters him and thus enabling spiritual growth.

In the verses quoted at the top of the previous page, the writer describes the transformation brought to the disciple by his Master: “every soul that caught his shining eye / became a poem himself”

Using the power of words, many disciples have tried to convey the potency of the moment when the Master's powerful soul current, flowing through his eyes, touches the disciple's soul. In *Call of the Great Master*, Daryai Lal Kapur writes of this experience with his Master Maharaj Sawan Singh: "He cast a piercing glance directly into my eyes. Oh, that glance! It was not a glance; it was a flash of light that, passing through my eyes, entered my brain. What miracles such a glance would not perform!"

Maharaj Sawan Singh himself, writing in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. V, confirms this experience. He says:

Powerful currents of life energy emanate from a saint and supercharge the surrounding atmosphere.... One finds a strange radiance and attraction in his eyes and in his forehead when one gazes at them, even for a moment. He feels a pull, and his attention gathers together and seems to ascend to the higher subtle regions from the gross regions. His consciousness expands and is elevated.

Despite such a privileged moment and the uplift and sense of joy that the physical presence of the Master brought to him, the experience of an ordinary disciple may be that life afterwards, with all its ups and downs, goes on very much the same as before. No one, even an advanced disciple, can sustain completely even progress. Those less evolved fail and fall again and again. In spite of this, nothing can take away the lasting power of an encounter with the Master. The inner transformation of the disciple is taking place from the time of initiation onwards and that is what is meant when, in the verse, the soul is described as becoming "a poem himself". The Master turns us into something beautiful and meaningful, however long that process takes.

In practical terms, the Master, at our initiation, gives us a system of meditation – simran, dhyan and bhajan – through the practice of which we can ourselves work at effecting the needed change. In *The Dawn of Light*, Maharaj Sawan Singh explains why our input as disciples and meditators is so important:

It is very easy for the Master to pull up a soul and bring it face to face with the Light within, but it is not easy for the devotee to bear the strain and behold the Light. The daily practice, however, makes it easy. The combination of spirit with matter is very intimate, and to avoid a shock it should be separated bit by bit.

That “bit by bit” separation of soul from body is achieved through daily meditation. Serious disciples know that everything that comes to them comes from their Master’s grace, but they also acknowledge the part they themselves have to play by living the life and meditating. That requires them to pour all their energy into *doing* rather than saying. It’s comparatively easy to talk Sant Mat, talk about love for the Master and read about the inner regions. How much harder it is to start to put it into practice through the faithful discharge of the promises we made at initiation. Now at last we understand what the writer means by saying that “the time for writing poems has long gone by.” Of course, the talks, the discussions, the books, and (dare we say it!) the magazine articles remain useful tools in reminding us of what we should be doing. But, the fact is, that once we’ve met the Master’s eyes and experienced that inner pull, then there is really no more to say. Everything that we might try to put in our poem – and much more – is waiting to be experienced inside when the divine Poet comes forward to meet us and the full meaning and music of his song finally dawns on us.



Buddha’s Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom

BY RICK HANSON WITH RICHARD MENDIUS

PUBLISHER: OAKLAND, CA: NEW HARBINGER PUBLICATIONS, 2009.

ISBN: 978-1-57224-695-9

In *Buddha’s Brain*, Rick Hanson and Richard Mendius offer practical advice on developing positive states of mind. Hanson is a clinical psychologist and a meditation teacher, and Mendius is a neurologist teaching at the University of California Los Angeles and Stanford University. Both are long-time practitioners of Buddhist meditation. Drawing on insights both from Buddhist teachings and from psychology and neuroscience, they offer a lucid discussion of the causes of human suffering and methods for developing happiness, loving kindness, and wisdom. Neuroscientist Daniel Siegel, in his foreword to the book, calls *Buddha’s Brain* a “guide to intentionally creating these positive changes in ourselves.”

The authors posit that the ancient teachings of Buddhism, including certain meditation practices designed to overcome the mind’s tendencies to lead human beings toward states of suffering, find a parallel in the discoveries of neuroscience on how the brain affects and is affected by mental activity. The authors have tried to make their book accessible to readers not well-versed in psychology, neuroscience, or meditation. They explain the Buddhist teachings simply, and present the findings of neuroscience succinctly and clearly with many charts and illustrations.

Along with Buddhist teachings and modern scientific theories, the authors also suggest some mental exercises. These include practices as simple as taking the time to notice the benefits one is enjoying instead of rehashing one’s complaints. They also include “guided meditations”, short texts of evocative and poetic imagery meant to be read and pondered at depth. As the foreword puts it, such exercises are “well-established steps”, which have been shown to “make us more focused, resilient, and resourceful” as well as to “enhance our empathy for others, widening our circles of compassion”.

The authors briefly describe some of the latest findings of brain science, giving references to other sources for those wishing to study them at greater depth. However, as Hanson says, their book is not a textbook, and their descriptions of brain functions are intentionally simplified and far from comprehensive. They focus instead on showing how certain mental exercises, such as deliberately practising mindfulness – staying present to what is happening now rather than getting lost in memories of the past and fears or hopes about the future – “have a plausible scientific explanation for how they light up your neural networks of contentment, kindness, and peace.” Hanson notes that psychology and neuroscience are both relatively recent fields, and there is much that we do not know. “But what is increasingly known is how to stimulate and strengthen the neural foundations of joyful, caring, and deeply insightful states of mind.” Based on his work as a psychologist and meditation teacher, he says, “if there is one thing I know for sure, it’s that you can do small things inside your mind that will lead to big changes in your brain and your experience of living.”

The book is divided into four sections. The first is on “The Causes of Suffering”. Here the authors note that in this world pain is inevitable but suffering is optional. Suffering arises from our reaction to and attitude toward events. In fact, we cause our own suffering through habitual mental patterns, which we have the power to change. As Tibetan Lama Yongey Mingur Rinpoche writes, “Ultimately, happiness comes down to choosing between the discomfort of becoming aware of your mental afflictions and the discomfort of being ruled by them.”

The second section, “Happiness”, deals with developing gratitude, cooling the fires of anger and greed, and awakening joy. Happiness begins with what Hanson calls “taking in the good”. Humans have a tendency to ignore the many blessings and comforts they have and to focus instead on the negative. Neuroscience confirms this pattern, observing the mind’s bias for capturing and preserving negative impressions, rather than positive ones. Hanson explains that through the process of evolution and due to the survival instinct, the brain has a highly developed capacity to detect negative information from the environment. In order to protect ourselves from the tiger in the forest, for example, we had to actively *look*

for the tiger. Our ancestors who “lived to pass on their genes paid a lot of attention to negative experiences”. Consequently, we have an innate tendency to focus on the negative rather than the positive, the stick rather than the carrot.

The brain typically detects negative information faster than positive information. Take facial expressions, a primary signal of threat or opportunity for a social animal like us: fearful faces are perceived much more rapidly than happy or neutral ones, probably fast-tracked by the amygdala. In fact, even when researchers make fearful faces invisible to conscious awareness, the amygdala still lights up. The brain is drawn to bad news.

When an event is flagged as negative, the hippocampus makes sure it's stored carefully for future reference. Once burned, twice shy. Your brain is like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones – even though most of your experiences are probably neutral or positive.

The bias of the brain toward negativity can be mitigated, however, with a committed effort to sustain a regular meditation practice and to focus on positive experiences.

Given the negativity bias of the brain, it takes an active effort to internalize positive experiences and heal negative ones. When you tilt toward what's positive, you're actually righting a neurological imbalance.... In terms of spiritual practice, taking in the good highlights key states of mind, such as kindness and inner peace, so you can find your way back to them again.

The brain's hard-wired negative bias is aggravated by the brain's propensity to manufacture and project something akin to “mini-movies” – brief clips which “are the building blocks of much conscious mental activity”. These clips, constructed from memories and imagination, reflect our beliefs, most of which are not explicitly verbalized. Buddhist teachings have always declared that our perceptions of the world are flawed, affected

by our subjective desires and beliefs. Neuroscience has also discovered that what we think we know is actually virtual reality simulated by the brain.

In fact, much of what you see “out there” is actually manufactured “in here” by your brain, painted in like computer-generated graphics in a movie. Only a small fraction of the inputs to your occipital lobe comes directly from the external world; the rest comes from internal memory stores and perceptual processing modules. Your brain simulates the world – each of us lives in a virtual reality.

The third section, “Love”, discusses engendering compassion, ultimately leading to “boundless kindness” for all. The fourth section, “Wisdom”, focuses on mindfulness – defined as the ability to direct and manage one’s attention – and on reaching a state of “blissful concentration”.

Being mindful simply means having good control over your attention: you can place your attention wherever you want it and it stays there; when you want to shift it to something else you can. When your attention is steady, so is your mind: not rattled or hijacked by whatever pops into awareness, but stably present, grounded, unshakeable.

Neuroscience has discovered that the brain has the capacity to learn and to change, and that mental activity reshapes the brain. “Neurons that fire together wire together.” In other words, whatever experience we focus our attention on actually alters the brain’s physical structure.

Attention is like a spotlight, and what it illuminates streams into your mind and shapes your brain. Consequently, developing greater control over your attention is perhaps the single most powerful way to reshape your brain and thus your mind.



