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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Yours Affectionately

Our lack of interest in meditation is due to the fact that we do not believe that this short human life is to come to an end soon and that God-realization is possible only in this short period of a few years. Our mind has not yet tasted the internal sweetness, but has enjoyed only the worldly pleasures, so it runs towards them speedily.

We need constant effort on our part to withdraw the consciousness from the lower centres, on which it has been dwelling for thousands of years. So if our mind wanders out at the time of meditation, we should not become dejected and disheartened. We should try again and again to stop it from going out.

Please do not get tired easily by the mind's tricks. Pursue in your efforts persistently. Great things are never accomplished in a hurry. By bringing in your mind again and again, though for a very short moment, your practice will become perfect and a time will come when you will be able to concentrate your attention immediately in the third eye and enjoy inner bliss.

No doubt in the beginning great and constant effort is needed, but it is nothing compared with the toil and trouble that we go through to gain worldly trash. Sit most regularly in meditation as your paramount duty to the Lord, not caring whether your mind cooperates or not, but keep on trying. And give some time daily to the study of Sant Mat literature also. This helps to keep up one's zeal and earnestness.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Quest for Light*



The Gift

Can suffering be a gift from God? It sounds contradictory. The word 'gift' is usually associated with something positive and cheerful, while the word 'suffering' denotes grief and sorrow. So how can anyone accept that there is anything good about going through pain and misery, let alone be thankful for it?

But for centuries, saints and mystics have testified to the fact that suffering is a great blessing because in one fell swoop, painful as it might be, God pulls us closer to him.

They explain that when we are happy and life is perfect, our remembrance of God is at best lukewarm because we are mesmerized by worldly life. Sure, we pray. We remember the Lord. But we are also engrossed in worldly affairs – occupied by work, family, friends, food, the internet and endless obligations.

On one hand, it is called living a life of balance. While travelling on the road to God, we engage in all the necessary activities of life. We play our various roles to fulfil the destiny that has been crafted out of our own past actions.

But inevitably, at some point, the scale tilts in favour of the world and subsequently in favour of the mind. And slowly, the Lord seems less important. The mind thinks, "I will take care of it. I will figure it out, I will keep everything under control." We are empowered by the strength of our 'human being-ness'.

Until we get hit by the storm of suffering. Then, the mind does not think about food or the internet. The mind turns to God. When we come face to face with our helplessness and our spiritual poverty, we realize the depth of our need for the Divine.

Then he becomes our only friend, our only hope. Everything else takes a back seat. And for that entire excruciating period of uncertainty, fear and doubt, the almighty Father has our full attention. He becomes our top priority. It is just him and us. And whether we are begging, fighting, surrendering or pleading, the point is, we are with him and him alone. And as long as we are in that space of deep and focused remembrance, our communion with him is perfect.

*If our suffering can pull us towards the Father, that's a blessing.
If our suffering can keep the Lord in our heart day and night,
and we have been able to tune ourselves to him, it's a blessing.*

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I

Adversity also teaches us that we have no control over anything; that karma and destiny are not just concepts. They are part of the natural law that applies to every living thing on this plane of existence. It is the reason why everyone's life is a mixed bag of happiness and sorrow.

The fact is, we are at the mercy of this law of karma. The saints say, the only thing we can do is make ourselves strong enough to face whatever is going to come; to turn to the only Power that can fortify us so we can survive on this plane of existence and, one day, escape.

So an episode of suffering should be considered a milestone for a seeker of God. It is the bitter medicine that cures the disease of complacency. It teaches us that we cannot afford to have our prayers become a formality.

It is a definite turning point because after the storm passes, our relationship with the Lord is not the same. Our faith is not the same. Our appreciation of his gifts is not the same.

They are stronger. They are deeper. And not because we survived; not because things turned out the way we wanted them to – but because we experienced him. And that's the gift. That's what we have to be thankful for.



All these trials that come to us in life, if taken in the proper spirit, as a satsangi should take them, will develop strength of character and make one throw himself absolutely at the feet of the Satguru within.... Life was given to us for a definite purpose and that, as a satsangi, you know well. It was given to us in order that, by complete surrender to the Satguru and daily spiritual exercises, we might be joined to Shabd and rise above this valley of tears. That is a privilege which nobody can take from you unless you yourself, in a fit of petulance or despondency, give it up or cease to make use of it. Even then, no satsangi's life is hopeless. But the road is much easier for us if we do our bit.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Light on Sant Mat*

Something to Think About

The phenomenal world is perishable, as are the sensual pleasures. Eventually, the individual concludes that he will not find happiness through the pursuit of the senses. Slowly and subconsciously, he begins to avoid those kinds of situations which in the past held his attention so firmly. Here we find an important principle in action: By moving away from negative and unrewarding experiences, we are automatically moving towards positive experiences, whether we realize it or not.

Liberation of the Soul



Meditation is the solution to all our problems. Instead of putting up your list of demands, put up your meditation. Then you will rise above those problems and they won't affect your mind at all. You will never be able to solve the problems of the world. But we can always rise above those problems so that they don't affect us. Meditation helps; that is the real solution to those problems. The solution doesn't mean that those problems are going to be solved according to our liking – destiny has to play its part – but you will be happy to go through your destiny. You'll be a willing spectator witnessing your destiny. That should be our approach to problems. Events will never change according to our wishes; we have to adjust to the events. Happiness lies in adjusting to the events, not making the events adjust to your liking. That will never happen. Destiny has to play its own part.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III

The Coffee and the Cup

A group of alumni, who were highly established in their careers and lifestyles got together to visit a former university professor of theirs. The reunion started with warm greetings and hearty smiles, as the former students shared their success stories and various experiences. Soon, however, the conversation turned to complaints about stress at work and the overwhelming burden of responsibility.

To lighten up the mood, the professor offered his guests coffee. He went to the kitchen and returned with a large pot and an assortment of cups, and asked them to help themselves. There were a wide variety of cups – porcelain, plastic, glass, crystal, some plain looking, some expensive, others exquisite. Admiring the assortment, each one quickly chose a cup and poured hot coffee for themselves. When they all had a cup of coffee in hand, the professor drew their attention to an interesting fact. He said: “Did you notice that everyone chose all the nice looking, expensive cups, and the plain and cheap ones were left behind on the tray?” The alumni were taken aback by this profound observation. “What all of you really wanted was coffee, not the cup,” the professor pointed out, “but you consciously went for the best cups and were eyeing each other’s choices. It is normal in today’s time to want only the best for ourselves; however, that is the very source of our problems and stress.”

The professor explained: If life is the coffee, then our jobs, money and position in society are the cups. These things are just tools to hold and contain ‘life’ – like the cup holds the coffee. The problem is, we treat life like a competition or a race. We dedicate our time, our priorities and literally all our energy into achieving the best jobs, more

money and higher social position. Basically, we want the best cup, and eye the cups that others have, rather than enjoy the coffee.

Desire is a very natural part of life. For instance, we may have a sweet tooth, and cannot resist a bite of a tasty dessert. Perhaps we cannot stop munching on salted chips all day long, or we may be addicted to TV serials, iPads, computers, shopping, or making money. We smell the rich chocolaty aroma of the dessert and we want to taste it. We see a scrumptious packet of chips, and we have the desire to munch. We hear our favourite program playing on TV and we cannot resist watching an episode ... and the list goes on.

Desires can be small, big, controllable or not – either way, they are endless, and in turn they create a domino effect. Tap one domino tile and it tips over to the next, which tips over to the one after that, and on and on it goes. Similarly, what began as a tiny desire starts a chain reaction with unimaginable and infinite outcomes. In other words, desire activates the mind; the mind interacts with the world; mind sees a means to fulfil the desire; mind in turn instructs the body to act; action has reaction; action against reaction has more reactions. Actions and reactions are endless – another life is required to clear actions and reactions. New actions made in a new life; more lives are required to clear old accounts of actions and reactions, and before we realize it, we are stuck in the creation, being reborn over and over again.

*Birth is for those who die weeping with desires unfulfilled.
Desires are the cause of suffering, and he alone is poor who has unfulfilled desires. He who is free from desires is richest. All desires arise in the mind, and when the mind is subdued and is merged in the sound current, the game is won.*

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

Thus, according to Maharaj Sawan Singh, it is our desires which cause all our births, rebirths, bondage and suffering. Being selective about our choice of cup causes us to lose our peace, serenity and comfort compared with what we would have had, had we simply drunk the coffee without thinking about the cup.

He further urges us to understand the true worth and real value of worldly things. They are meant to serve us, just as the cup (job, money and society) is simply a means to hold the coffee. We are not to become their slave. For instance, we earn money for our living, but what is its true worth? Will it help us at the time of death? Will it take us nearer to God?

Maharaj Sawan Singh insists that nothing we do during the twenty-four hours of the day and night is 'our own work'. The money we earn is for our spouse and children. The rest of it is spent on serving our relatives and friends. We give some time each day to looking after our body, but even this body will leave us one day. This body is not our real self. He compares the body to a bag of dirt which will be cast away and burnt in fire or buried in the earth. Our own work is to save our self, our soul, from this never-ending cycle of transmigration and to take it back to the home of the Lord.

Which brings us full circle back to the cup and coffee story: the reason we find ourselves stressed and tense in life is due to our priorities – giving more importance to the design and quality of our worldly life (our jobs, money and our social positions) rather than taking time to enjoy the true purpose and essence of life.

The saints present us with this precious and practical advice: Live in the world, but do not be of the world. Do all our work with a detached mind – hands to the task, and mind to the Lord. Cultivate the habit of keeping our mind aloof from the world and concentrate on returning to the Lord. In other words, enjoy the coffee and don't be obsessed with the cup.

True Love

Moses, a great devotee and lover of God, requested God to bring him in contact with or point out to him a greater and a better lover of God than himself and God pointed to a bird upon a tree not far away.

When Moses approached the bird and asked if there was anything that it wanted or that he could do for it, the bird replied that it was perfectly satisfied and happy except for one thing. Moses asked what that was. The bird said that it wished it did not have to leave its perch to go for water. Moses was astonished at this and pointed out that the bird was perched on a tree immediately above the water and all it had to do was to fly down a few feet to take a drink. The bird replied, “That is true, but I am always thinking of God, and the time spent in flying down and taking a drink takes me away from the contemplation of my love for God for a few minutes. That is my only regret.”

Upon hearing this, Moses felt ashamed and realized that this bird loved God more than he did.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*



*During simran the longing for God in one's mind
Should be as intense as that of a lover for the beloved,
While sitting, standing, awake or asleep,
The form of the beloved is always
in the mind of the lover.
He does not forget it even for a moment.*

Kabir, as quoted in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. I

The Question

*The boat is there, but the boatman is missing.
How will the traveller go across?*

Sant Paltu, His Life and Teachings

The mission of the saints is spiritual in nature. Their words, their poetry, their songs and their discourses are intended to awaken souls; to pull apart the thick curtain of the mind; to draw our thoughts to truth, light and reality; to help us realize and fulfil our true purpose on this earth. Sant Paltu's poem does all of the above. He has compared us to a traveller sitting in a boat without a boatman and poses the question: How will the traveller go across? With powerful words revealing a disturbing truth, Sant Paltu then forces us to imagine the inconceivable situation in which the beloved Satguru is missing from our lives – where he is absent from our thoughts and our actions – and we are the reason he is missing.

Could we even fathom what that would be like – a life without the Master, without his grace and love? How did we allow this to happen? The poem continues:

*How will the traveller go across,
when faith in the boatman is lacking?
How will he reach the Beloved across the ocean
when he is reluctant to renounce worldly pleasures?
Neither is he pure of mind nor does he live a virtuous life.
He does not listen to the Master's wise words,
And without love in the heart,
his speech and actions are at odds.*

Could these be our mistakes? Do we lack faith? Are we indulging in worldly pleasures so intensely that we prefer this world to our Satguru? Have we strayed from the honest, moral life required to travel on this spiritual journey? Are we disobedient to the Master's teachings? Is our love for him inadequate?

According to the Great Master, pride and lack of faith are two of the greatest obstacles in achieving spiritual progress and attaining true enlightenment. To a person who is a seeker, faith is the first and foremost crucial step to freedom of the soul.

Dr Julian Johnson illustrates the correct attitude of a seeker using an example of a man who is on a journey to a foreign country. That man will consider the different means available to reach his destination – be it air, land or sea – and then after careful deliberation, he will select the perfect option to get him there. However, once he starts his journey on that plane, train or ship, his period of judgment or discrimination is past. The moment he boards the vessel, he surrenders himself to the skill and trustworthiness of the pilot, driver or captain to take him safely to his destination. At this time, there is no question of our own ability or capacity because we know we are not capable of steering the boat ourselves. This is the faith we show in the boatman, our Master.

Pride and lack of faith would cause even a spiritually inclined person not to recognize a true Master. When we allow our ego to guide and direct our thoughts and actions, we leave no room for the Master in our heart and soul. Ego is the 'I-ness', the feeling of being superior, of having a separate identity, of individuality.

Maharaj Charan Singh explains that this individuality keeps us away from the Father. It seeks its own pleasure, and then, following its desire for worldly sights, sounds, smells and feelings, chases the attractions in the creation.

Ultimately, ego starts the negative chain reaction which Sant Paltu describes in his poem – we are reluctant to renounce the worldly pleasures which tempt us at every moment; we do not adopt the virtuous way, and instead succumb to the five passions. And where the attraction and love for the world is greater, our love and attention towards the Master and God is less. On top of all this, we lack even an ounce of knowledge or power to pull ourselves out of this chain reaction.

The result is that our meditation practice suffers. We are unable to concentrate in simran. Frustration turns into disinterest, and then we do not put any sincere effort into our meditation. The result is this:

*The traveller's boat does not cease wobbling,
for he heeds not the boatman's words.
The fool, bereft of all wisdom,
brings in his own cleverness.
He attends not, O Paltu,
to the Master's path of the Melody within.
So, the boat is ready, but the boatman is missing,
How will the traveller ever get across?*

The life we lead right now, the decisions we make, our routines, the activities we set for ourselves take priority in our lives. If we take stock of the times we are awake, these activities dominate all of our time and attention. Our thoughts, desires and interests pull our attention out into the world so strongly and easily that we are unable to focus and withdraw our consciousness for a significant and consecutive length of time.

The Satguru gives us his all and promises never to leave us. He is saddened when we do not do our meditation. Because without our

consistent effort, without our repetition of the five holy Names, there is no hope of our crossing the ocean of this human life.

Thus, the best answer to Sant Paltu's question is: Meditate to invite the Boatman into the boat, and meditate more, so that his grace and love will lift and carry us across the ocean.

We can take inspiration from the profound words of Great Master's personal attendant, Bhai Shadi:

*If you have true love for the Master, you shut your eyes
and in two minutes you are in Sach Khand.*

As quoted in In Search of the Way

Our Master's will is for us to do our meditation with faith, sincerity and concentration. When we follow our Master's instructions, we are enabling him to be at the helm of our boat and take us to our destination.



A Message from the Master

Maharaj Charan Singh's speech delivered on July 27, 1952

You all know, today is the birthday of Hazur Maharaj Ji (Maharaj Sawan Singh).

The days on which saints incarnate in this world are extremely happy and fortunate days for us, because their coming augurs the emancipation of millions of souls. The saints teach us the method of devotion, and by helping us to practise it, they carry us along with themselves to the lap of the Supreme Father. Thus we are released from the bonds of birth and death.

The birthdays of saints and mystics should not be celebrated merely by eating cakes and sweets; rather, we should look within ourselves and reflect over their message, over the divine path they bid us to adopt. We should search within, whether we are truly following their directions, whether we are steadfast on the path that they showed us, whether we are firmly adhering to the high principles of living they laid down for us. If there are shortcomings, then we should earnestly resolve to overcome them.

Saints come to the world not to lay the foundation of a new creed or religion. They come to dispel our illusions, to free us from our shackles of external practices, rituals and ceremonies. They come to impart to us the secret of Nam or Shabd, to teach us the method of meditation, to lead us back to our original Home, to the Lord.

It is we who, after the departure of such great mystics, distort and arrest their teachings so as to give them the shape of a formal religion. But the saints always come to herald the practice of Nam, to impart the secret of the divine Word to the true seekers of the Lord.

You all know, Hazur Maharaj Ji for forty-five years promoted the message of Sant Mat in spite of all odds and obstacles, not caring for criticism from orthodox people; how he travelled to far-off places, from village to village, undergoing all sorts of hardship, even at that age. As a result of his loving efforts and untiring dedication, today we find his blessed devotees not only in all the corners of India, but also spread out in so many foreign countries. They, too, celebrate this day with love and gratitude.

Treasure Beyond Measure



Saints and Masters have left no stone unturned in their efforts to explain their message to us: they spend their entire lives explaining simple, straightforward and basic truths to us. They have spent long periods – often as much as forty or fifty years – serving us. They have written many great books and, by collecting together the writings and discourses of many saints, have explained to us how this world is transient and perishable; we will never find happiness and peace in it; peace can only be found through devotion to the Lord and by loving him. There is nothing lacking in the explanations of the saints. But we let their words go in one ear and out of the other, saying to ourselves: For whom are the saints saying all these things?

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. II

What Zone Are We In?

Since the goal of Sant Mat is to eliminate our ego, we need to study the enemy. “Know thy enemy” is an advice as old as the advice to “Know thyself”. Ego or I-ness covers everything we are attached to and everything we regard as ‘me’ and ‘mine’.

To create a picture or map of our ego, let us start by colouring red every aspect of me and mine. So our body is painted red as well as our house and car. All our loved ones are red. Paint our office red and the road from home to office in red. Red is the sangat and red also any people we depend upon. Loved ones overseas are red and draw a red line from them back to ourselves. Colour red also any area of our life where we might get upset or be disturbed – our finances should be red and our sports club and so on. When we have finished this process, we will have a giant map of the Red Zone, which represents our ‘field of concern’. We spend time every day managing and guarding our Red Zone like a faithful dog, constantly allowing our attention to roam around the Red Zone to check that all is going well for us.

Now everything which is outside of our Red Zone, we colour that green. Green is for God – the will of God can prevail in the Green Zone. However, in the Red Zone, our attitude is that ‘my will should prevail!’

So it works like this: if there is a flood or a famine somewhere where we have no relatives or business interests, then we say, “Well that is God’s will; that is their karma!” Of course, we feel sorry for them but we lose no sleep because that happened in the Green Zone. Similarly, the will of God prevails when some outbreak of disease kills

people in a place far away, in the Green Zone. However, when our own spouse falls ill or we lose a job or some other setback happens in the Red Zone, the zone where we care about things, then we get very upset and we think the Master has forgotten us and the Lord does not love us and we whine and complain.

Here is the catch – our Red Zone is someone else's Green Zone! And for God, everything is green. Viewed from this angle, we realize that our Red Zone exists only in our own minds. This insight shows us perhaps what the mystics mean when they say our ego is an illusion. For the people in another country, all the Red Zones in our city are painted green.

Now we can see clearly why we do not weep when there is an aircraft accident and hundreds die. That happened in the Green Zone and we are so ego-focused that we only react when something happens in our Red Zone. The next time we get upset about anything, we should step back and remind ourselves that this is just Red Zone thinking and that for God all zones are green.

The goal of Sant Mat is to die while living, which requires withdrawing from our own body. We need to think about the fact that the body is the very centre of our Red Zone and we will never be able to withdraw from our body until we have also withdrawn from the rest of our Red Zone. Until our Red Zone becomes green in the sense that we surrender to God's will in everything, we will not be able to bring our attention back home to the eye centre and paint even our own body green.

In the book *Spiritual Letters*, there is an interesting quote in a letter written to the Great Master by Baba Jaimal Singh. In that letter, he lists the aspects of life which the disciple should not regard as his own.

In a sense, Baba Jaimal Singh is telling us the things which we are not allowed to include in our Red Zone. The list makes it clear that disciples should have no Red Zone at all!

The body belongs to the Satguru, as also do pain and pleasure. All activities, occupations, households, service, money, shops, mansions, land, wealth, sons and daughters, all belong to the Satguru – everything is the Satguru's. Then why should you get perturbed in pain or pleasure?

Baba Jaimal Singh, *Spiritual Letters*



We may be rich or poor, healthy or diseased, happy or unhappy. All these states are boons from him, a result of our own karmas. Accept them cheerfully. Be happy with his will. Try to act as you are directed by the Master, and thus free yourself from the shackles of karmas and death, through the Name of the Lord. His will is his greatest gift. Nothing excels it. It is only if he wills it that we obey him. We can meet a Master if it is so willed by him. We can attune ourselves to Truth and then share the bliss, only if he wills it. But only those for whom it is ordained can obtain it.

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

Love and Devotion

Rabia was once asked, “Do you actually see the Lord whom you worship?” “I would not worship him,” she replied, “unless I saw him.”

We have often been told that the Lord is worthy of our devotion, our love, our admiration and loyalty. But how can we love someone we have never seen? How can we admire someone we do not even know?

Conceptually, we are told that he is our Supreme Father, that he provides everything for us and that he sustains us, and yes, somewhere deep down in our hearts we do have faith that a higher power is there watching over us. But is this enough ground on which one can build a relationship of love, reverence and esteem?

Intellectual love is all right. Emotional love, which is influenced by other people, is all right. Any type of love is all right, but nothing can surpass the love of your own experience; and for that experience, meditation is necessary. You can build love and devotion only through meditation, not otherwise. Meditation builds everlasting love, and that is building on a rock, and not on sand.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

It is only when we still the mind at the eye centre and tune it into that power that is reverberating and glowing within us that we will begin to know the Lord. When we are asked to devote ourselves to the Lord, to worship him or sing his praises, the first thing that comes to mind is an assortment of adjectives to flatter him. However, in order to worship him, we need to experience him; in order to sing his praises, we need him to provide the Melody. Paradoxically though,

once the Divine Composer gives the cue for that majestic symphony to begin, we will most probably be left with no words. In the Adi Granth we read:

I met my friend and asked her the signs of her Lord. But she does not know how to speak, because she is filled with the intoxication of the bliss of love.

Now, just because we may not have experienced the Lord or the Shabad within, does it mean that we do not have any love for him? Love for the Lord is inherent in us; it may first manifest itself through simple things like the beauty of a rainbow or the sweetness of a melody – that joy, that compassion and that admiration that we experience are reflections of the love we possess. This love then matures when we listen to the Master’s teachings, when we sit in his company and when we look into his eyes – that familiarity, that closeness, that comfort that we feel, are aspects of the love we have for our Creator.

So the love is there; be it emotional or intellectual, all we have to do is channelize it and use it to access that true, eternal love.

For now, when Masters ask us to do our meditation with love and devotion, what they expect us to do is to draw from what we have and reflect it through our efforts, our sincerity, and our determination to gain that experience. Eventually it will be the awareness and experience acquired through meditation that will turn us into real lovers of the Lord.

And let me remember You with calmness and determination, even when it is hard for me to say: ‘I love you’.

Dhu'l-Nun al-Misri, as quoted in *Like the Flowing River*



Repartee of the Wise

A new student approached the Zen master and asked how he should prepare himself for his training. “Think of me as a bell,” the master explained. “Give me a soft tap, and you will get a tiny ping. Strike hard, and you will receive a loud, resounding peal.”

William Wray, *Sayings and Tales of Zen Buddhism*



During Maharaj Charan Singh Ji's trip to Minneapolis, before the Master faced the television cameras for his brief explanation of the Sant Mat philosophy, he was told by the interviewer how the tense and agitated atmosphere that normally prevailed in the studios had been dramatically transformed by his presence into one of peace and tranquillity, and was asked the reason for this extraordinary change. With his characteristic smile, he replied simply, “If one's mind is at peace, it also radiates peace.”

Heaven on Earth



A man on a camel passing the sage Zardalu shouted at the sight of such a humble one who was believed by his followers to be a great teacher: “If the teaching is designed to uplift man, why is it that so many men can be found who are cast down?”

Zardalu answered without raising his head: “If it were not for the teaching, man would not, I agree, be cast down. He would be extinct.”

Idries Shah, *Thinkers of the East*

The Master Answers

A selection of questions and answers with Maharaj Charan Singh

Q: *We are told that all things in our life are an illusion or a dream. Is that right?*

A: What it means is that what we see has no reality – reality in the sense that nothing will exist, nothing will remain, everything is perishable, and it is not everlasting. Where is Christ now? Where is Nanak now? Where is Moses now? They were all reality when they were in the flesh, but where are they now? Flesh is no more, so flesh is not reality. That spirit in them was real, not the flesh that is made of five elements, that merges back into the five elements and then you cease to exist. Where are those old civilizations now? New civilizations are coming up; old ones are vanishing. What is real here? Everything is perishable, nothing is everlasting. In that sense, it is illusion. Only he is real, whom we do not see, whom we do not know. What we see, what we are supposed to know, what we think we know has no reality at all.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

* * *

Q: *Maharaj Ji, could you tell us the value of seva at home, at our own satsang centres?*

A: 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. It doesn't make you so happy if anybody makes *you* happy, but it definitely makes you very happy when you are in a position to make someone else happy, and that is

the real seva. Seva for any institution, seva for any individual, seva for the masses – in other words, a charitable attitude of helping other people – that is seva. We do seva with our body, we do seva with our mind, we do seva with our money. The base of seva is love and devotion for the Father. Seva is not meant to make one a leader in the community, in the group, or to wield any authority – that is not seva. Seva should create humility in us, should eliminate ego from within us. The more you feel at the level of the earth, the more your mind will go to meditation, to the Father. So seva always has an advantage. That is why you find this missionary spirit in Christianity. That's the greatest boon Christ taught his disciples – serve one another, help one another, help the needy, serve the needy. That's the real seva.

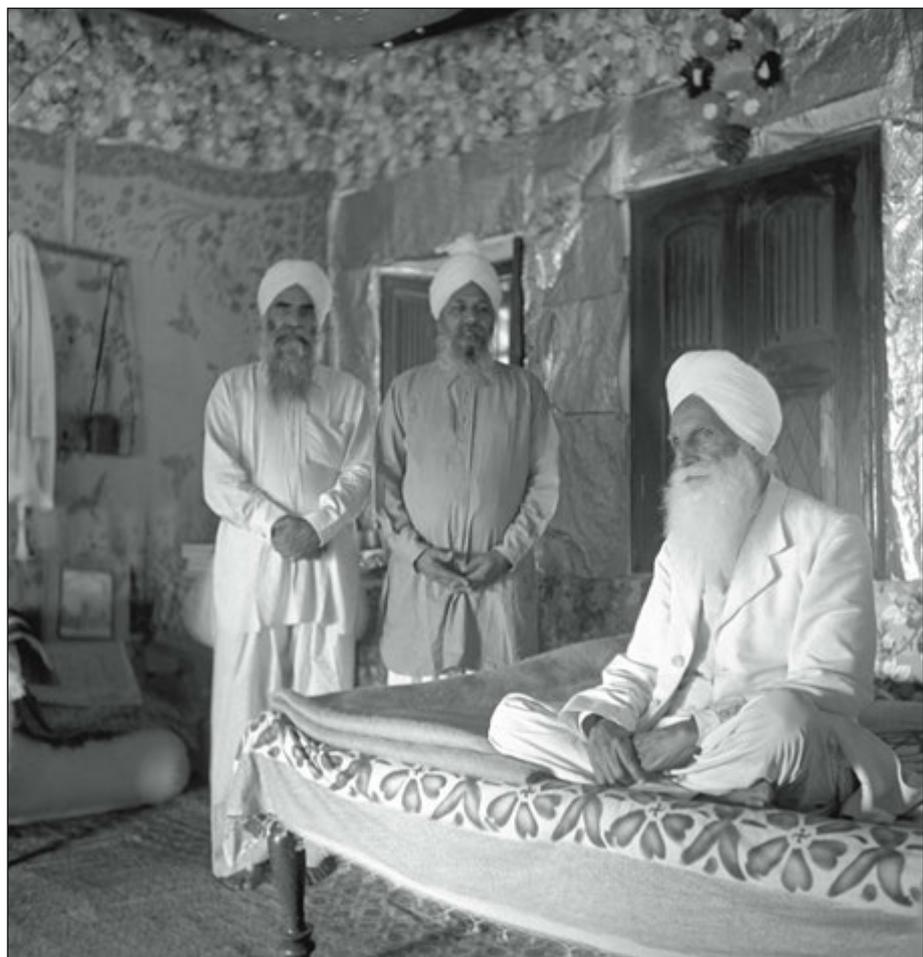
Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

* * *

Q: *Even when sitting and meditating without concentrating – the mind may be wandering – does even that have its own value?*

A: That has its own value. If we are always frightened that we will never be able to walk, then we will never be able to walk. Even if out of two hours you get only ten minutes of real concentration to your credit, it's worth having. The next day you may be able to get fifteen minutes of concentration; the third day you may be able to add another ten minutes. Slowly and slowly you will be able to increase your time. If during the first day you sit for two hours and you say, "I don't concentrate at all," and from then on you don't sit in meditation, that is no good. We must give our proper time to simran and meditation every day.

Die to Live



Restlessness

Man is a creature of habit, but man is also that rare beast who has the ability to unlearn his instincts, provided he is aware of his own destructive habits. Restlessness is one such habit. What is restlessness? It is the disturbance of mental, emotional or physical equilibrium, which results in heightened and continuous states of excitement. This state occurs because we are continuously oscillating between negative and positive mental activity; fear, anxiety, worry, remorse, sorrow or discontentment versus love, pleasure, happiness, contentment and joy. Like a pendulum, we swing from one extreme to another.

All this persistent mental activity causes noise inside us, which is worse than any external noise because it is with us wherever we go. The mind is a powerful entity and it never rests. It is always doing something; thinking about something; ruminating about something, creating unrest and confusion within. This confusion builds a nervous energy in us, making us 'rest less'. So while the mind is overtly busy churning a factory of thoughts, we are compelled to act and are left to cope with the consequences.

The cultivation of stillness is the best cure for this nervous energy we feel.

Stillness is foreign to us. We know only about movement, action, desire. These are the workings of karma, which essentially is habit. Repeated thoughts and actions soon lead us down well-trod paths, and gradually take us further and further from the open tranquil spaces of spirit.

Life is Fair

Most of us spend our entire life imprisoned within the confines of our conditioned minds or habits. Our physical and mental conditioning bind us to the world and its objects. If we are to change this conditioning, we have to calm down and bring stillness into our being.

When you lose touch with inner stillness, you lose touch with yourself. When you lose touch with yourself, you lose yourself in the world. Your innermost sense of self, of who you are, is inseparable from stillness. This is the I am that is deeper than name and form.

Stillness is your essential nature. What is stillness? The inner space or awareness in which the words on this page are being perceived and become thoughts. Without that awareness, there would be no perception, no thoughts, no world.

Eckhart Tolle, *Stillness Speaks*

The way to bring stillness into our lives is to pattern our days around consciously living in silence and in awareness of our senses and emotions.

It has been said that silence is golden. To go through our day calmly and simply, we have to cultivate silence. Outer silence is helpful; it relaxes and rejuvenates the mind and body from all the external noise around us. But in order to find the state of inner stillness, we have to develop that silence within ourselves; a silence which helps us to be a witness to our own thoughts. It is in the depths of this silence that stillness is found and awareness is obtained. Once we become fully conscious of this silence, we step out of lifetimes of human conditioning.

Keeping a check on our senses and emotions is also a very important discipline for us. For example, so often when a feeling of

boredom arises within our minds, the first reaction to this feeling is restlessness. The second step is to do something about this restlessness: we watch TV, surf the web, and reach out to people through social media. But little do we realize that we are providing the mind with more material stimulation, which only excites it further. When we are only identifying with our thoughts, we easily get bored and restless. Instead, we should just observe our thoughts in silent awareness and create a space within us, a space where we are fully alert and aware of our own thoughts. In this space of stillness, we will feel a sense of quietude, and slowly the feeling of boredom and restlessness will subside.

We need to remember that we are not our state of mind, which is always subject to change. As disciples on the path, we have an added advantage – we can use our simran to alter our state of mind and calm ourselves down. In fact, before reacting to any situation or feeling that arises within us, we should pause and begin doing some simran to still the mind. This brief silence will give us a chance to regain our awareness.

In our daily meditation, we are tapping into our true essence, which is not the constant flow of thoughts, emotions, desires, worries and other preoccupations; it is a deep silent awareness that stands behind all the ceaseless activity of the mind. But we are so absorbed by what goes on within our minds that we have forgotten our true innermost essence, which is a quiet, peaceful stillness. This is our soul's natural quality; this is who we are, this is who we have always been. We are the still water beneath the turbulent waves of a restless mind.



Did You Know?

When we put our spiritual goal first, we find that our happiness and contentment increase. When our lives are clear, harmonious and balanced, we sleep well at night because we are at peace with ourselves. We discover for ourselves, through our own experience, that it is through the natural order of the Lord's creation and not through our efforts that we receive whatever we have.

Honest Living



Man is a wonderful creation. He not only carries his past history with him; but the whole creation, visible and invisible, and the Creator of all are within him, and he has been gifted with the capacity to see all that lies in him and to be one with his Creator.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*



Once a soul has received initiation from the Master on this path, giving the full method of concentration and other spiritual exercises, the disciple cannot fail to attain ultimate realization, provided he is faithful to the instructions given to him at the time of initiation and he sticks to the path with increasing love and devotion to the Almighty.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*



After Initiation

Some of us think our way of life can remain essentially unchanged after initiation. Basically, we think we can keep the vows, but go right on with all the same priorities and commitments as before. We seem to think that, given the greatness of our Master, our lives will be spiritually fruitful without making any sacrifices or major adjustments.

It is like someone who makes a decision to go on a diet and lose ten kilos. Suppose they make a formal, public resolution to do so. Then they go on eating exactly the same amount of food they have always eaten, doing no more exercise than they have always been doing, and they think some magical force will cause the kilos to drop off.

It is this type of thinking that trips us up. Some of us even take the third vow very loosely. To live a clean, moral life, we think, is only a very broad, general guideline. Or it only refers to earning an honest living and remaining sexually faithful to your spouse. Does it matter if we cheat in business? Tell a lie? Take something that isn't ours?

But what if everyone we know cheats on their taxes and it is considered normal? Do we think there will be no consequences if we don't pay what is due? What if everyone in our community thinks it is normal for men to abuse or harass their wives? Can we hurt any living being without consequences to our own spiritual development? Can we simply follow customs without inviting their karmic repercussions? The present Master has often repeated: Everything matters; everything we do counts. As he is fond of saying: Every penny makes a pound.

Every action of ours can either take us toward the Lord or away from the Lord. There can be no spirituality where there is no morality. The present Master continually reminds us that initiation is not a 'rubber stamp'. At initiation, the Master does not 'stamp' us with the label 'satsangi'. As Sardar Bahadur Ji said: "One does not become a satsangi simply by being initiated. One must mould his life in accordance with the principles of satsang. Every thought, speech and action must conform to them. Actions speak louder than words.

From Attachment to Detachment

An Explanation by Maharaj Charan Singh

Q: Is it possible that although someone is steadfast on the path, attending to their meditation, that due to their heavy load of karma they're not conscious of any progress whatsoever during their whole lifetime, but then at the time of death they have actually made enough progress to not have to come back, but never to have realized it before that time?

Well, brother, if there is a wall ten feet in width and you start making a hole from one side, a man sitting on the other side does not know how deep you have been able to make the hole until the last brick is pierced. Then he knows how much progress you have made. Even if the hole has gone nine feet through the wall, still the man sitting on the other side doesn't know till the last layer is broken. In the same way, with whatever time we give to meditation, we are definitely making progress, but we do not know how thick the wall of karmas is that we have to pierce through. Not a single moment of meditation goes to waste. It is taking care of thousands and thousands of karmas which we have been committing in our past lives.

And as far as coming back to this world is concerned, it is not so much your spiritual progress which determines that, but your attachments. If you are not attached to this creation, if you are not attached to people in this world, although you have not made much progress within spiritually, you may not come back to this world at all. On the other hand, even if you have made spiritual progress, but there are certain strong attachments left in you – your mind has made certain grooves which you cannot get rid of – those attachments can definitely

pull you back to this creation again. Then when you come back to this world, again you will make progress and get rid of those attachments through meditation, and you can go back home. Whatever progress you have made does not go to waste when you leave the body. In the next birth, you will just pick up from where you left off.

So actually, it is our attachments which are pulling us back to this creation. Meditation is the only way to detach ourselves from all these attachments. With the help of meditation, we are able to detach ourselves from all these bondages in this world by attaching our mind to the Shabd and Nam, to the Light and Sound within, which pulls us to its own level.

Die to Live



*May my mind turn away
from illusory attachments, passions and vices.
Execute your will in such a way, O Lord,
that I may desire only you.*

Sant Dadu Dayal, as quoted in *Voice of the Heart*

Evolving Devotion

Any minute you spend in love and devotion for the Father is to your credit. It's a stepping stone. You are making some progress maybe at an ant's speed, but you are making progress.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II

We are devoted. The Master sowed the seed of devotion in us when we were first called to the path. He taught us how to nurture that seed of devotion when he initiated us. By honouring the vows we took, we can grow in love and devotion.

But the most challenging vow is maintaining our daily meditation. Meditation, for most of us, is a sleepy affair or a worldly one during which meals are planned, conversations rehearsed and emails drafted. We get up from our sitting without a sense of accomplishment. Our analysis tells us that we are no better off than when we first started, no more pious than before initiation, no closer to our destination. The lack of quality or results can even become an excuse to skip our meditation.

No greater enemy exists in this life than negligence.

Sarmad, Martyr to Love Divine

The Masters clearly state the importance of dedicating time to our daily meditation. The seed of devotion will grow and ripen simply with regularity and punctuality in our meditation practice. In the book, *Sheikh Farid*, the mystic Khwaja Chishti is said to have stressed punctuality even in performing each of the five prayers at the

appropriate time each day. He explained, “The fact is that constancy, perseverance and regularity are great things in spiritual life.” He saw the discipline of following the religious laws as a foundation for the practice of the spiritual path. It established regularity and a well-ordered life. It trained the practitioner in self-discipline.

That is how our love starts growing. The more time we give to meditation, the more our love grows.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III

We are only asked to push the rock, not move it. Even the half-hearted, distracted sittings matter. They are the difference between keeping a vow and undermining it. They are the difference between showing up or missing the opportunity to tune into your true self, the Shabd. What’s encouraging is that the fickleness of our devotion is secondary to our Master’s acceptance of it. Even our failures and failings are welcomed by the Master.

*O Farid, for those whose bow is patience,
remembrance is the arrow.
God does not let them miss their target
even if the arrows are poorly aimed.*

Sheikh Farid

In the Zoroastrian scripture, the word ‘devotion’ is also referred to as ‘work’ and ‘deed’. Not attending to meditation is the same as not doing our allotted work for the Master, despite somehow making time for other work.

*Opportunities are usually disguised as hard work,
so most people don't recognize them.*

Ann Landers, as quoted in Relentless Mode

Efforts at meditation are the seeds we sow to attain nothing less than the Lord himself. We overlook the goal of our efforts and focus on the difficulty of the task. Sardar Bahadur Jagat Singh reminded us that we cannot expect to achieve God-realization without paying the price for it.

*That is our real work. There is no higher work than this.
Keep doing it every day; then all your endeavour will bear fruit.*

Baba Jaimal Singh, Spiritual Letters

Anything worth doing is worth doing well. To cultivate devotion, we try to sit attentively with love. We try to be more active in concentrating, letting go of thoughts no matter how important they seem. When we catch ourselves drifting, we restart the simran. We try to hold our attention at the eye centre, and look into the darkness. During bhajan, even if we do not hear anything, we sit unconditionally because this is our Master's instruction.

While the mystic Shiekh Farid was still quite young, his pious mother set out to train him to pray regularly, lovingly and with dedication. She told him that each time he prayed with love and devotion in his heart, God would put a sweet under his prayer mat. Then, while the young boy was absorbed in prayer, she would slip a sweet under the corner of his mat. And, of course, at the end of his prayers he always looked and was delighted to find the sweet, his gift from God. One day, his mother forgot to place the sweet under the mat. When she realized her mistake, she was deeply distraught and

prayed fervently that Farid's faith in God would not be shaken. One version of this legend says that when Farid finished his prayers, he told his mother there was no need to put a sweet under his prayer mat anymore, because he was enjoying the sweetness of the Lord's presence.

From this story, we learn that the more present we are during our spiritual practice, the more we will enjoy it. Even in the absence of any apparent results, the sittings become natural and indispensable. Meditation provides the strength to fulfil our responsibilities. The attitude towards meditation becomes a different 'have to'. Instead of "I have to meditate because I am initiated," we graduate to "I have to meditate because I want to."



*Every moment I am trapped
in a hundred transgressions,
from morn to eve I am saddened by my desires.
I seek to release myself from this trap –
Destiny it may not be,
but I will make ceaseless effort.
Sarmad, Martyr to Love Divine*

Everything Is the Lord's Service

As we go through our life pursuing our goals, we tend to separate the spiritual from the world. After we sit in meditation in the morning, we usually rush off to face the world – our careers, our families and the numerous obligations that fill our day. Seldom are we mindful of the Lord's presence and grace in our lives. However, as Maharaj Charan Singh says:

Whatever you do in this world to keep your Master within you or keep yourself with the Master is meditation, is a part of meditation. Whether you are properly sitting or just sitting quietly, full of love and devotion for the Master, or hearing the Sound, seeing the Light – whatever you are doing, even worldly work – if your Master is with you in your mind, in your heart, if all your dealings conform to the teachings, to the commands of the Master, then you are with the Master. That is why we say that Sant Mat is not only meditation; it is a way of life.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

We sometimes experience glimpses of this realization. After a spell of inspiration following a Dera visit, or perhaps a good stretch of meditation, we feel great love for the Lord. Often, we become disinterested in the world, feeling inclined instead to do more seva and meditation.

It often escapes us that our lives in the world are an integral part of our service to the Lord. The world is so relevant to our daily lives that it is our conscious reality – yet we divorce it from our spiritual lives.

But as disciples, we must realize that this world of illusion is still the Lord's play, and a good disciple must understand that even as we serve the world, we serve the Lord as well.

We are but simple caretakers of all we have. As we move around every day – earning a living, serving our families, relating to others in the various roles our karmas dictate, let us remember that this world is still the Lord's domain. Everything we are and everything that we will ever be is by his grace and his grace alone. It therefore follows that everything we do is service to the Lord.

For me the time of action does not differ from the time of prayer, and in the noise and clatter of my kitchen, while several persons are together calling for as many different things, I possess God in as great tranquillity as when upon my knees as the blessed sacrament.

Brother Lawrence, *The Practise of the Presence of God*

Henceforth, we must do our very best in both our spiritual and worldly lives. We cannot neglect one in favour of the other, since balance requires our efforts in both worlds. Also, our pralabdh karmas have to be burned as part of our destiny. We have to face all the challenges our fate brings, as there is no escaping from karma.

We have to do both things. We have to live in the world, but we have to meditate also. We have to keep the balance, because a certain load of karma can be cleared only by facing life, not just by attending to meditation. When we become too absorbed in meditation, sometimes the Master withdraws the grace so that

we work in the world also. You are not to leave your worldly work. Rather you may even be pushed to the world, to face the world.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III

Let us just bear in mind that the Master is always with us, guiding us in all our worldly and spiritual struggles. In any case, if we humbly offer all we do as we walk this earth as a human being and as a sincere devotee, we can be confident that the life we live is a life for our Lord.

As Baba Jaimal Singh wrote to Maharaj Sawan Singh:

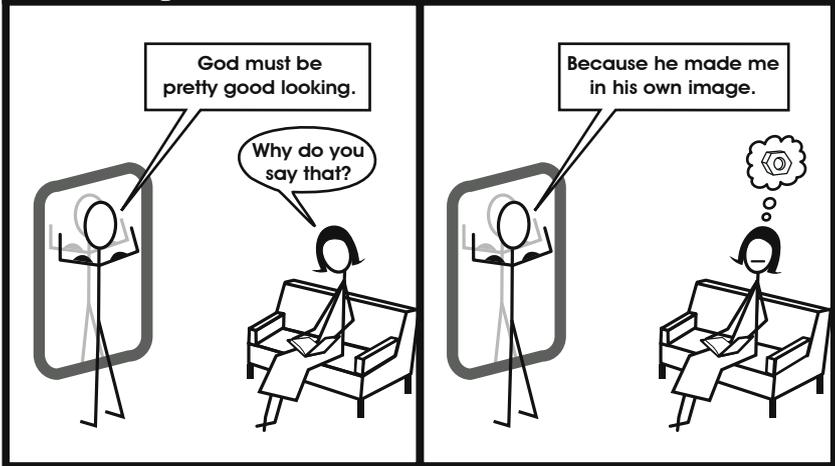
All the worldly work you are doing is service rendered to the Master. Meditation is also the Master's service.

As quoted in *Heaven on Earth*



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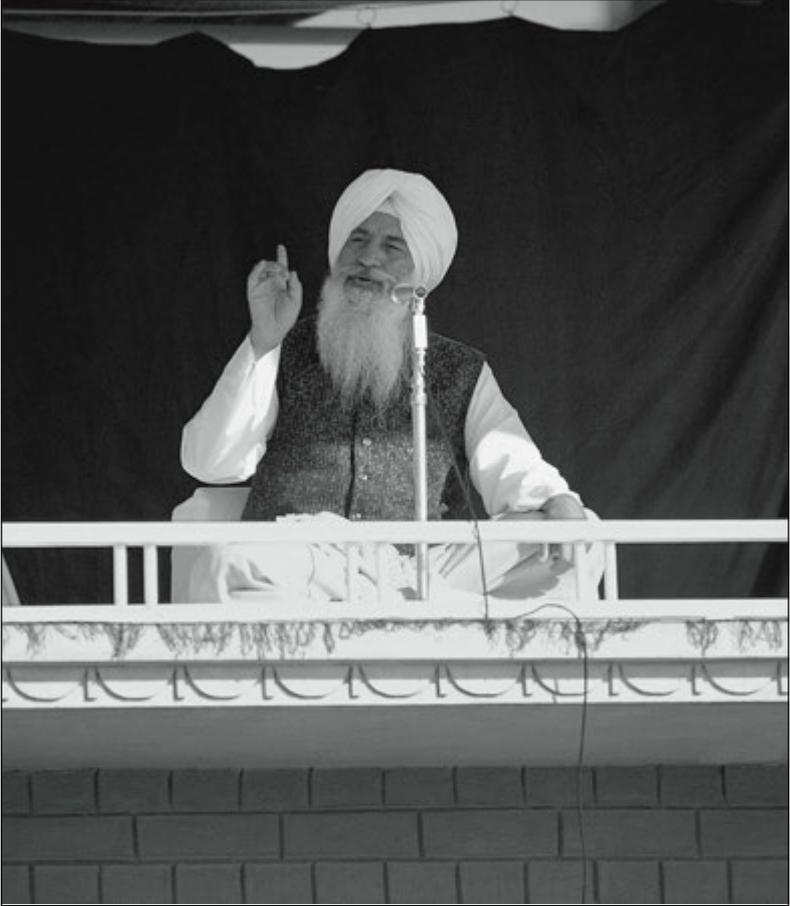
The Art of Listening

In English, to 'listen' to someone has two meanings. The first is to hear with attention what the person is saying. The second meaning is to 'obey' what the person is saying such as when parents tell their children to listen to them.

Since the explosion of cell phone usage, it has become harder to get anyone to listen at all even in the first sense of actually paying attention. In a restaurant, people at the same table are checking their phones every few minutes. Some statistics suggest that, on average, people check their phones every five minutes. In India, it is every three minutes, even when they are driving! In the middle of a conversation, we hear our phone chime with a message and we are tempted to check the phone in spite of being in the midst of a conversation. At a concert during the interval, look up and down the row of seats and you will find everyone checking their phones. No one is talking to anyone.

This habit of constantly messaging or checking Facebook or emails develops into a pattern of having a short attention span. When we want to discuss something important with a family member or friend, we feel an enormous pressure to hold their attention. We can feel that they are often tempted to check their phone. When we talk to teenagers, we often feel that they are not listening at all. We can even test this by talking nonsense and they will just nod automatically.

So this is how we are and yet the most important spiritual exercise we are trying to learn is to listen to the Sound Current within ourselves. How can we expect to listen to this inner sound, when we can barely focus on listening to anyone in our normal day? Just as we are encouraged to practise simran during the day, we should also practise listening.



Try this exercise the next time you meet a friend. Try really listening to them. Make eye contact, look at them, resist checking your phone, actually absorb what they are saying and wait until they are completely finished before speaking. One of our bad habits is that we do not listen as much as we wait to speak. Before a person has finished their sentence, we are saying 'I know' and before they have made a point, we are trying to interrupt with our views and arguments.

Practise taking a full breath after the other person finishes talking and before responding. It is amazing how hard this is and it reveals how assertive we are and how little we listen.

Satsang is a great opportunity to practise listening. We often tune out at satsang and drift along daydreaming or doing simran rather than paying attention to the talk. That is why when someone asks us what the content of the satsang was about, we can barely recall anything. As an exercise in listening, we can make a point of trying to note three points from a talk and remember them afterwards.

The best form of listening to satsang is not merely hearing with attention but obeying the Master's teachings. Try to implement in our lives each week one thing which we have heard in satsang. As disciples, we must become expert listeners. With practice, we can learn to listen well to our friends and family, listen to satsang, listen to the Master and, as a result, we may begin to listen to the Shabd.

Part of our daily meditation practice is to do bhajan, which is listening to the Sound. The Master emphasizes that disciples must do bhajan. Many of us neglect this. It is this inner listening practice which will develop our inner faculty to hear. If we do not do the listening practice, then the inner faculty will remain dormant.

The very concept of 'disciple' derives from the idea of a student with a willing, listening and obedient heart. The journey from initiate to disciple involves the art of listening.



Mere reading of the scriptures or listening to the teachings of saints is not enough. We must put the teachings into practice and travel the path ourselves.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*

Let It Seep

The Word is the Guru, the soul attuned to the Word is the disciple.

Guru Nanak, as quoted in *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. II

The mystery of God and the mystery of his creative power, palpable to us through the medium of our Master is a reality that sinks slowly into our consciousness, just like a steady drizzle seeps slowly and gradually into the soil.

At this point, most of us are still in the initial stages of this discovery. We do share a beautiful relationship with our Master, sometimes physically and more often internally, but it is safe to say that we are still far from knowing the Beloved.

Each one of us has a general idea of what relationships should be like and what is to be expected from them. For example, we regard the relationship between husband and wife as the platform on which a family unit is built, and we expect spouses to love, care, understand and be by each other's side through thick and thin.

Similarly, our perception of the Master is based on an idea of who he is and how he should be rather than on who he truly is. Additionally, the way we relate to him is also greatly influenced by the ways of the world.

Through the glasses of our mind, which are tinted with our limited knowledge, our preferences, our conditions and our restrictions, we have ended up fashioning a Master that is made according to our own likeness and notions.

If we want to truly get to know the Master, we will have to step out of the rigid yet secure confines of our concepts, and open ourselves to the new dimensions that our meditation can unravel for us;

dimensions that lie beyond the barriers of the mind. As we learn to live this relationship in spirit, we will realize how limiting it is to love through the mind.

While learning to rise above the mind, it is essential that we cultivate a large heart with a generous capacity for change. Holding on to our old concepts or being loyally wedded to a specific viewpoint can become one of the biggest hindrances in getting to know reality.

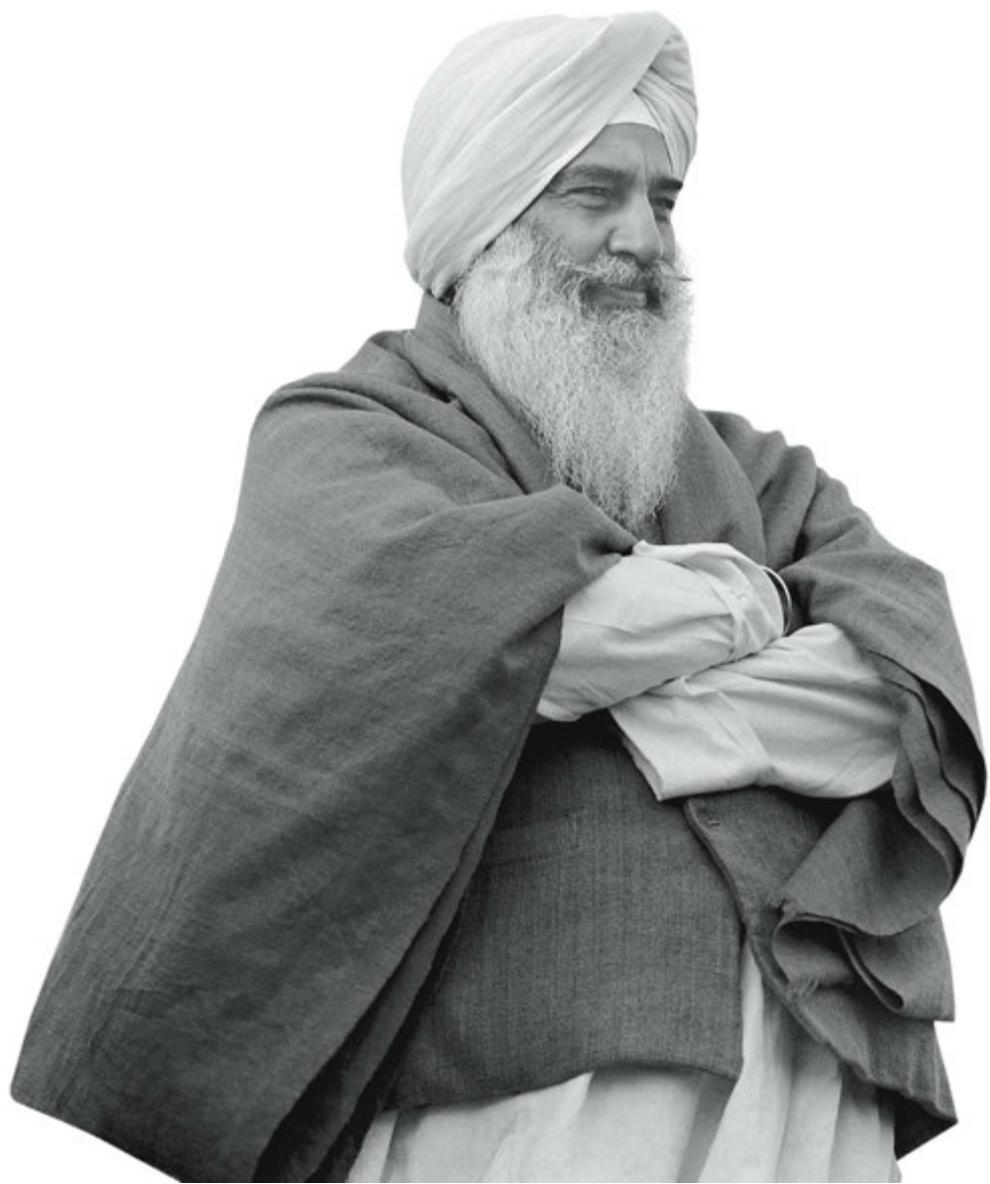
As we embrace the deeper and subtler emotions that come with a finer and greater sense of awareness, we will enjoy this relationship as we have never done before. The truth has to be infinitely better than whatever our limited and biased imagination can devise, if only we allow this truth to seep in.

As we allow our consciousness to mature without hindrances, we will be able to let the whole truth slowly seep into our understanding – we will get to know our Master for his own true self; we will get to know the Lord for who he is; and we will get to know ourselves for what we are: the same essence as the Lord.



We do not have to limit God to our present understanding. Each day we can surrender our concepts of God and come to him with empty hands. Knowing God is not a single, static event. It is an unfolding experience. The more we surrender what we think we know, the more we open to what we do not yet understand.

Paul Ferrini, *Love is My Gospel*



Heart to Heart

In a letter to a disciple, Maharaj Sawan Singh wrote: “Never think for a moment that you are at such a long distance from me. The Master in his Shabd form is within you and is watching you and looking after you in every way. If you rise a bit more, you can talk with him when you like. Kabir says:

If Guru resides at a distance, then direct the soul towards him, riding the steed of Shabd, and instantly the soul is in communion with him.

My connection with you is not limited to this life, but is for all times. All of us are to reach our own home, Sach Khand.”

Dawn of Light

INFORMATION ON ARTICLE SUBMISSIONS

If you wish to submit an article for publication in *Spiritual Link*, please mail a printed, typed version by post to one of the following addresses. *Emailed submissions will not be accepted.*

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- Articles should focus on the Sant Mat teachings and may also draw on the universal teachings of other mystics.
- Articles should not be based on, or discuss, the personaity of the master or the writer.
- Articles must be your own original work. If quotations from other sources are included, complete source references must be given.
- Articles should be between 500 and 1500 words in length.

If accepted, your article will be edited according to the requirements of the magazine. You will be contacted only if your submission is accepted. Please include your name, age, postal address, and email address with your article.

Book Review



Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol

TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY PETER COLE

PUBLISHER: PRINCETON, NJ: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2001.

ISBN: 0-691-07032-6

In *Selected Poems of Solomon Ibn Gabirol* Peter Cole offers to contemporary readers an inspiring and surprisingly accessible glimpse into the works of this Jewish poet and metaphysical philosopher. Ibn Gabirol is considered one of most important Hebrew poets of the medieval era. Avraham Ibn Ezra, a revered poet who lived a century after him, refers to Ibn Gabirol as “a great sage” who “saw into matters of the soul’s mystery.” Little is known about the life of Ibn Gabirol, beyond that he was born in Malaga, Spain, in 1021 or 1022 and that he was educated in Saragossa, a major centre of both Islamic and Jewish learning. He may have written as many as twenty books, but only his *Diwan*, or collection of poems, his philosophical masterwork *The Fountain of Life*, and a short work on ethics have survived.

Peter Cole has translated a selection of the poems from the *Diwan*, arranged here in three sections: Personal Poems, Poems of Devotion, and Ibn Gabirol’s most famous opus “Kingdom’s Crown”. In the extensive introduction, Cole provides background on the literary, political and religious context of the time. He explains that eleventh-century Andalusia was a vibrant centre for the study and discussion of works from many different cultures, and that Ibn Gabirol’s writings show the influence not only of Jewish spiritual and philosophical literature, but also of Islamic philosophy and Arabic translations of Plato, Aristotle, the neo-Platonists, and even some writings from India. These rich and diverse sources, Cole says, account for a certain “universal” quality in Ibn Gabirol’s writings.

The Poems of Devotion seem to need no explanation, and not to be burdened with scholarly references. But if one looks at the notes at the back of the book, one learns how the lines of a given poem implicitly invoke texts from the Bible, Talmud, Midrash, or other revered sources. An example is the poem “The Hour of Song”:

*I've set my shelter with you
in my awe and fear and in despair
established your name as a fortress;
I looked to the right
and left and no one was near –
and into your hands
I committed my liveness....
And here out of love
In you my mind is immersed:
In song's hour
The work of my worship is yours.*

The notes tell us that the opening lines of this poem resonate with Psalm 31 and the following lines with Psalm 142, and that the closing line refers to words in the *Book of Job*, “Where is God my maker, who giveth songs in the night?”

In the introduction, Cole offers a small sampling of quotes from the prose work *The Fountain of Life*, which give the reader some inkling of the metaphysical or mystical insights that inform Ibn Gabirol's poems. For example:

If you raise yourself up to the Primary Universal Matter and take shelter in its shadow, you will see wonders more sublime than all. Desire, therefore, for this and seek, for this is the purpose for which the human soul was formed and this is the most tremendous pleasure and the greatest of all forms of happiness.

Parts of *The Fountain of Life* are written in the form of dialogue between Master and student. For example: “*Master*: The purpose for which all that exists [is] the knowledge of the world of the divine... *Student*: And what is the fruit that we will achieve with this study? *Master*: Release from death and adherence to the fountain and source of life.”

Ibn Gabirol considered “Kingdom's Crown” – an extended contemplative poem in sixty cantos filling sixty pages of the book – “the summit of his work”. The work is traditionally divided into three parts, or movements,

the first being something like a prologue. In the first and second parts each canto begins with the same words: in the first part, “You are...” as in “You are One” or “You are vast”, and in the second part, “Who could...,” as in “Who could put words to your power?” and “Who could speak of your wonders?” Because of the rhythm of these repeated phrases, Cole likens “Kingdom’s Crown” to a kind of “incantatory free verse”. Though written as a “private meditation”, not intended for liturgical use, it came to be included in the prayer books of nearly all Jewish communities from eastern Europe to the Middle East to North Africa and today is often read aloud at Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement).

In the twenty-two cantos of the second part, Ibn Gabirol traces the levels of creation from lowly earth – the “globe of earth and water surrounded by air and fire” – up through ten successive levels to the “Throne of Glory”, the dwelling place of the Lord. His poem mixes astronomical and astrological imagery with the mystical description of ascent.

*Who could make sense of creation’s secrets,
of your raising up over the ninth sphere
the circle of mind,
the sphere of the innermost chamber?
The tenth to the Lord is always sacred.
This is the highest rung,
Transcending all elevation
And beyond all ideation.*

Of this tenth sphere he writes:

*Who could approach the place of your dwelling,
In your raising up over the sphere of mind
The throne of Glory
In the fields of concealment and splendour...*

Ibn Gabirol begins the third part of “Kingdom’s Crown” with a confession of his weakness and many failings:

*I'm ashamed, my God,
and abashed to be standing before you,
for I know that as great as your might has been,
such is my utter weakness and failing.*

In his weakness he throws himself on God's mercy:

*If my sin, my God,
is too great to bear,
what of your name and its majesty –
If I cannot hope for your mercy,
who but you could protect me...
I would flee from you to Thee:
I would hide from your wrath in your shadow.
I'll hold to the edge of your mercy
until you have mercy –
and not allow you to go away,
not until you've blessed me.*



