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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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A Celebration of Empty Space

*Every loss...
a leaf letting go
from the tree
that roots you to this world.*

*Every petal
falling away...
you are that much closer
to the radiant heart of the Rose.*

*Every dream
passing out of your life...
is the death of a shadow,
as the Light within you awakens.*

*You sit alone in a room, at last.
Your chairs, forever filled, are empty now.
The echo of voices dies into silence.
Your clutter of concerns drifts away.*

*Empty space opens inside you
like a sudden flutter of wings.
Something in you soars.*

*Your Beloved
steps over your threshold,
looks into your eyes,
then closes the door
that led back to your world.*

*The room is alive with Song,
the walls, the floor, and the air
blazing in the sunlight
of his smile.*



Homeward Bound

My father passed away recently, and my siblings and I were able to be with him during the last four days of his life. Each day he slowly became more and more still; he was gradually less engaged with us; his breathing slowed; and then on the last morning he quietly stopped breathing. There was a kind of sacred space in the hospital room during this time with very little connection to the outside world. We were cocooned in this process of our father's leaving, and we thought about little else.

When I returned home, I listened to a podcast about hospice care. The nurses talked about the ways in which they cope with the process of dying. One nurse said she is very careful not to imagine her own death. This was interesting to me because as my father was dying, I thought a lot about my own death, and it was a meaningful and rich experience. It caused me to appreciate my life and all the blessings I have been given. By pondering my own death and the tenuous relationship we have with this world, I felt a deeper gratitude for everything.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book, *Death: The Final Stage of Growth*, wrote:

It is the denial of death that is partially responsible for people living empty, purposeless lives; for when you live as if you'll live forever, it becomes too easy to postpone the things you know that you must do. You live your life in preparation for tomorrow or in remembrance of yesterday, and meanwhile, each today is lost. In contrast, when you fully understand that each day you awaken could be the last you have, you take the time that day to grow, to become more of who you really are, to reach out to other human beings.

There is something about loss and grief that touches us in a way that nothing else does. We are moved to think seriously about our lives, and to stop postponing what we know we need to do. An understanding of death brings us squarely into the present; knowing that each day could be our last helps us to live more authentically.

We may think that focusing on our short time on earth is morbid or frightening. We dread the loss of our loved ones, and we worry about our

own aging. We wonder what will happen to us when we die. But Maharaj Charan Singh Ji, in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, explained that our meditation practice is a slow and gradual withdrawal from the body, and that it is the same as the process of dying:

You see, at the time of death we have to pass through the same process as we do at the time of meditation. Whenever the soul leaves the body, it has been withdrawn to the eye centre – only then does the soul leave the body. And at the time of meditation also, we try to withdraw our consciousness back to the eye centre. That is why meditation is known as a living death. It is the same process which we have to follow at the time of death. That is why death is not painful for a satsangi – because he is passing through the same process every day. Actually, meditation is nothing but a preparation for death.

So maybe focusing on death is not such a bad thing. Maybe it is what will, in reality, liberate us from the death we are living with in our everyday lives.

In the Buddhist tradition, practitioners are encouraged to be mindful of death. The contemporary Buddhist teacher Anyen Rinpoche writes in his book *Dying with Confidence*:

The river of birth carries us to old age. No matter what we look like on the outside, we are all going to get old. We should not think that just because we are young, just because we are healthy now, that we have time.... We have been born – that itself is a sign of death. We must therefore reflect on the fact of death now. If we do not think about it now, it will be difficult to think about it when it is happening – as it inevitably will. Most importantly, it will be impossible to have any mindfulness that death is approaching if we refuse to reflect on it during our life. Through the cultivation of mindfulness now, the forces of habit and practice will help us practice it at the time of death. Truly, through the power of committed practice, there is nothing that cannot become easy.... The fact of death is certain. And for this very reason, because it is completely certain, death is something we should be fearless about.

Instead of avoiding the topic of death out of fear, we can fully commit to our meditation practice and become fearless. And instead of avoiding meditation because we are restless and agitated, we can be grateful to have a practice that takes us gently through the dying process before the fact.

When summer ends and the last leaves fall from the trees, tree branches become stark lines across the autumn sky. The air changes, and we are reminded of the seasons of loss in this transient existence. The leaves gently separate from the tree and slowly float to the cold ground, waiting to disintegrate into the dark soil beneath.

In the same way, when we experience loss in our lives, we are often changed unalterably. Sometimes this happens so slowly we don't even know it is happening until we look back and realize that life will never be what it was. Sometimes it happens so quickly we can't grasp at first how dramatic the change really is. But happen it does.

We may be more afraid of change than we are of death. The coronavirus, for example, changed our lives in ways we couldn't foresee, and yet as we experienced it, we continued to want to return to normal. We wanted to get back to the office, stop wearing masks, be with our families, travel freely. We wanted to be able to go see the Master. We wanted to get on with the life we had before the pandemic, the life we took for granted, the life we thought we were supposed to be living.

And yet the pandemic, like death, continued to badger us, to push us into the unknown, to force us to change our habitual patterns. Some of the ways in which it altered us have been so profound, perhaps we will never get back to our "normal" lives. But was "normal" really working for us? How do we deal with the loss of the things we expected of life?

As Soami Ji wrote so eloquently in *Sar Bachan Poetry*: "Let us turn homewards, friend. Why linger in this alien land?" Perhaps our desire to return to normal is a sense of lingering in this alien land, wanting this life to be more comfortable, stable, predictable than it really is. This alien land has always been illusory, changeable, unstable and unpredictable. Death, pandemics, and wars have always been part of life on this planet. The time in which we live is no different from many times in the past, and these kinds of times will come again in the future.

A lot has been written about the deterioration of people's mental health as the world has faced one crisis after another, and fears mount about more waves of the pandemic and even nuclear war. People are burned out, frustrated, tired of restrictions, fearful, angry, and fed up. And yet, if we go back to Kubler-Ross's statement, we can see that the denial of death is the real problem, not death itself. It is resistance to change, not change itself that causes our fears. She explains that if we realize each day could be our last, we take the time to grow, become more authentic, and reach out to other people.

When a leaf falls from a tree and lands on the ground, the natural cycle of life is for it to be regenerated into new soil in which other seeds can eventually grow. We can either take the view that the current difficulties in the world are insurmountable obstacles that are changing our lives for the worse, or we can look at them as generating new ways of being in the world – as part of a deep transformation process. Don't we need to develop new ways of living on this earth?

When we become frustrated and depressed with worldly events, we can ask ourselves: What do we want? Do we want to return home, as Soami Ji urged? Or do we want to linger in this alien land, hoping it will return to "normal," wishing for life to be different than it really is? Rather, let us grieve our losses, change our habitual mental patterns, turn homeward, and get busy with our own real work, as Soami Ji advised.



So Far Away

As the days come and go and through the prism of my varied life experiences, I find myself asking: Is the Master really here with me? How will I know he is if I don't *feel* his presence?

Amid the 'usual' happenings of the world – the pandemics, wars, and personal suffering – maybe we are hoping for a brief respite, some relief from the uncertainty and inevitable pain that comes with being human. I know I crave something familiar, a place where I can find some safety, peace and quiet – a soft spot to land.

It is not a running away from reality, but rather desire for a deep grounding and leaning into truth and unconditional love. It is reassuring that no matter where we find ourselves, we are held. So, I naturally find myself turning to the Master.

But even though the spiritual teachings and meditation are my anchors and the Master my saviour, most of the time he feels so far away from me.

It would be easy to assume that if you follow a spiritual path, you have automatic and unfailing access to a constant feeling of being near the Divine, *with* the Divine. But during our journey through life, it seems as if the relationship we are trying to build with our Master ebbs and flows like the waves of an ocean. At times we have strong feelings of love and devotion, and then other times there is a kind of void, a darkness where we can't seem to feel his presence anymore.

“Far away” is usually defined as being at a great distance in both space and time. I understand that I cannot be physically close to my Master all the time. But maybe that is not even what we desire; maybe what we really crave is to feel a connection that transcends space and time.

And this is exactly what the Master teaches us: that our relationship with him is not physical, not bound by the fetters of the body, mind and senses. Our connection with him is mysterious, completely different from our worldly ties to family and friends. He is unlike anyone we have ever loved before. This love is unique and unexplainable, impossible to fathom with the mind. His love is unconditional: he wants only what is best for our ultimate liberation. All he expects from us is that we give our deepest attention and utmost effort to the practice of simran and bhajan. He does

not expect perfection; he simply sees our potential and pushes, cajoles and gently leads us out of the world and into his embrace.

We have heard Baba Ji say that the Master never turns away from us, that he is right here in front of us. It is we who have turned our gaze away from him. “Far away” is also defined as a state of being absent-minded, distracted, absorbed. I wonder, as I search for his love and presence in my own life, if I am the one who is far away, distracted by and absorbed in my own preoccupations and attachments. It is my mind that is distracted, marveling at the seductive illusions around every corner. Caught up in the current of daily life and all its emotional ups and downs, I am the one who lets go of his hand, not the other way around.

But again and again, he pulls us back, and then we slowly begin to understand a little bit about why we practise simran and bhajan. Our connection to him is not some effusive emotional state, which we often mistakenly believe is real love. Every day and in every moment, we can choose to come back to him. We can *choose* to love him, through the actions of our simran and bhajan. We can choose him over the worthless fool’s gold of the world.

In the poem “In the Stream of the Friend,” Rumi offers us some comfort:

*Because he is the Soul of our soul,
we cannot escape him....
Sitting with the friend we keep asking,
“O friend, where is the friend?”
Drunken with pride we ask, “Where? Where?”
Even though we are in the lane of the friend.*

*Jalal al-Din Rumi:
Divan-e Shams-e Tabrizi (Selections)*

I see that it is my love that wavers – my words shallow and meaningless – while my Friend’s love for me is steadfast and deep, beyond my understanding. In the end, all we can offer is our actions, consistent and faithful. Sustaining a relationship with the Master, like anything of great value, requires our time and effort. It is through this effort of sitting daily for meditation that we grow in love and faith that there is no distance between us and him.

Even through the darkness and distractions of the world, he draws us to him. Through the process of meditation, he moulds us so that eventually, gradually, we realize that, as Rumi says, we are already in the lane of the Friend. As we walk this life and travel through the web of our karmas, we can only hold fast to him when we remember him.

So, is he far away or as close as our own breath?

I guess that's up to us.



What's in Your Cup?

Imagine you are holding a cup of coffee. Someone bumps into you and you spill the coffee everywhere. Why did you spill the coffee? Because there was coffee in your cup. If you had been holding a cup of tea, you would have spilled tea. If you had been holding a cup of milk, you would have spilled milk. The point is that whatever is inside your cup is what will spill out. Similarly, when life shakes you – and at some point, life will definitely shake you – whatever is inside you will spill out. So the question is, what will spill out when something disturbs your balance? What is inside your cup?

Let's say you want to get to an appointment or a class or a meeting. You leave early enough to allow you to arrive promptly. You venture out into the world with a smile on your face and a calm demeanour, but as you step outside, you realize you may soon need an umbrella, so you head back in to get it. But it's not where you remember leaving it, and it takes a few minutes for you to find it. Stepping out the door again, you realize that you'll have to hurry if you want to make the bus. Then you trip as you step off the curb, causing you to drop your keys, so you spend another minute gathering them. Then, as you are about 20 steps from the bus stop, you see it pulling away, leaving you behind. You stop in your tracks, just as someone nearby, also rushing for the bus, bumps into you.

What spills out of your cup? Is it a harsh word or reaction to the frustration of missing the bus? Is it a shrug that despite your best intentions, you just weren't destined to get to the bus in time? Is it laughter at this quirk of fate?

We have to go through our destiny – there's no avoiding it. We created it; we can't change it, so we should make our best efforts and then accept the results. That's living in the will of the Lord. We can't control the events or people in our life, but we can control our responses to them. Baba Ji suggests that our responses to things that happen in life should not be reactive but should reflect our acceptance of whatever the Lord gives us. After all, it is our actions in previous lives that have created our destiny in this one, so there's really no one to blame for anything that happens to us. And we should also keep in mind that the Lord will provide us with

what we need to get through anything in this life – we just need to have the courage to persist. Whether things work out as we want is not in our hands, yet we must make the effort to get what we want.

Similarly, the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epictetus, conveyed orally and passed down through notes taken by his devoted students, can give us helpful guidance today – even after more than two thousand years. He stressed clear thinking and awareness of the divine within oneself. As we learn in *The Enchiridion*, a short manual of ethical advice compiled by one of his disciples, Epictetus taught that some things are up to us, but most things in life are not up to us. We control our opinions, impulses, desires, and aversions, but things that are external to us are not up to us. And so much of this life is external to us, including possessions, power, health, and what others think of us.

For example, we may do our best to get the most luxurious house, the most prestigious position, the healthiest body, or a strong influence over others, but the results of our efforts are not up to us. Someone may outbid us on that house; another may have better connections to that job; our genes may make us prone to conditions that weaken our immune system; or we may not have the charisma to influence others. We can choose to be bitter or angry at not getting what we want, or we can choose to accept what happens and persist in our efforts to move forward.

As a matter of clear thinking, we can reflect on whether we are holding on to resentment or anger at some situation or person in our life that we cannot control. If we think clearly about what is up to us – our attitude, daily remembrance of the divine within us (our meditation), gratitude for what we have been given and for whatever events the Lord places in our life, knowing he will also provide the strength to go through them – then we will have peace, love, and joy spilling out of our cup when something shakes or bumps us.

Epictetus taught that it is important to develop indifference to what we cannot change; take positive action to change what we can; and be attentive to discern how the first scenario differs from the second. We may be familiar with these points through the Serenity Prayer, which asks God to grant us the serenity to accept the things that we cannot change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the

difference. Daily remembrance of our divine nature, through meditation, and the understanding that we have a choice about how we respond to what happens to us will help keep our cup filled with awareness, serenity, and wisdom. Epictetus also taught that it is human nature to perform acts of kindness, cooperate with others, and be grateful. Being a good human will fill our cup with contentment; otherwise our cup will be filled with unhappiness, restlessness, and frustration.

We can choose how we respond to events in life, most of which are not in our control. If we keep filling our cup with gratitude, kindness, serenity, and love, any negative emotions we harbour will be diluted, little by little. If we don't rush to judgment about whether events in our life are good or bad, but accept them as they come, then we may see what appear to be obstacles or results that we weren't hoping for simply as events in life's drama. We can also keep our cup turned upward to catch the love and grace of the Lord that is always raining down on us. Regular meditation and simran during the day will facilitate clear thinking, which can help us avoid rushing to judgment about others and situations as well as choose appropriate actions.

As Epictetus advises in his *Discourses and Selected Writings*: "Don't hope that events will turn out the way you want, welcome events in whichever way they happen: this is the path to peace."

Imagine you are holding a cup of yourself. When life shakes you, when the ups and downs of life bump you, what will spill out of your cup?





Don't Look Back

The sky is so blue that even an atheist would have to believe in heaven. Cherry blossoms drift overhead, the sun is shining and I am breaking down; breaking open. The greatest pain we have is to love and to lose the loved one. It has been said that “for every hello there is a good-bye.” Even to anticipate that separation is painful. “I object,” a friend exclaimed about the whole sorry state of loving and losing that comprises our life in this temporal world, and this after 50 years on the path. And yet, as Baba Ji said to a heartbroken sister: What do you mean your loved ones leave you – they were never yours to begin with.

One of the greatest paradoxes of spirituality seems to be that in order to restore our faith in the path, we have to be torn, sometimes forcibly, from the charms of the visible world. But do we have to feel the cutting edge of deprivation or the fog of grief to hone our longing for him? Or can we actually choose to let go, to rise up and appreciate what we are given? Can we agree to say good-bye?

Baba Ji has talked about the biblical tale of Sodom and Gomorrah. These two towns were being destroyed, buildings were burning, people were crying and dying. Then some angels came to save some of them and told them only one thing: “Don't look back!” Baba Ji explained that those who looked back became stuck (rooted by their attachments), but that those who just kept walking were saved.

So: What is our particular Sodom and Gomorrah? What is causing the burning in our comfortable world? Is it the current events of war and pandemic? Is it political upheavals and loss of faith in our governments? Is it the parting with our dear and familiar companions? Is it the inevitability of our aging? Is it the fear of dying despite our pledge and stated desire to “die while living”?

What should we do? Let it burn. Don't look back. Keep walking toward our goal. To do this we have to stop fighting the inevitable. After all, we can't walk away and fight at the same time. Fighting takes energy; it inflicts pain on us and others. Walking is easy, simple and natural. Walking away from our own personal Sodom and Gomorrah is letting go of our pain. Baba Ji has told us that if we are gripping a burning hot iron rod, we would

not think twice about letting it go. He reminds us that we are responsible for our own well-being, for our own peace of mind, and he exhorts us to never indulge in self-pity. He asks us to learn to move on.

In a question-and-answer session, a sister asked Baba Ji for support: her husband had recently died from Covid. She felt that she could neither move forward nor go back; she was stuck, and terribly lonely. Baba Ji listened compassionately and then explained that people come to us only through the give-and-take of karma; it is the Lord who takes care of us.

Maybe, just maybe, the Master knows what he is doing. He is allocating our karma for our best spiritual interest, even when we don't like it. Maybe, just maybe, we are never alone. Here is a thought: infinite attention. If the Lord is infinite, then so is his attention. His attention and guidance are always with us. That guidance provides us with the opportunities that we need to make spiritual progress; to grow into our divinity. Baba Ji often tells us that if one door closes, others will open.

The American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson concurs, and in his famous essay "Compensation" wishes us this truth as "a star in many dark hours and crooked passages in our journey, that would not suffer us to lose our way." That star is the awareness that the Lord's grace is always with us, that there is a purpose for everything that he does and that "a certain compensation balances every gift and every defect."

And when we lose sight of that star, that understanding, it's not that we are weak or bad; we are just deluded. We have stayed in the movie theater of the world's illusions for too long. In the darkness we have mistaken the reflections on the screen for reality. We have fallen in love with shadows; we have given our hearts to phantoms.

The saints come not to fulfill our desires but to shatter our illusions. We have to leave the theater to see the sun. To know God's love, we must attend to meditation. That meditation is supported by all our life events, as they are doled out to us by our Master. Emerson writes:

The death of a dear friend, wife, brother, lover, which seemed nothing but privation, somewhat later assumes the aspect of a guide or genius.... It permits or constrains the formation of new acquaintances and the reception of new influences that prove of the first importance to the next

years; and the man or woman who would have remained a sunny garden-flower, with no room for its roots and too much sunshine for its head, by the falling of the walls and the neglect of the gardener is made the banyan tree of the forest, yielding shade and fruit to wide neighborhoods of men.

Grief is a contraction, a folding in over what is lost; love is an expansion, a celebration of what we have – the Lord himself. When we close our eyes in pain, they can open to the consolation within us. First the dark tunnel, then the open field where sits our one true Friend.

We love our dear ones; but we love them most truly when we love the Lord within them. That love surpasses all others. Then we are loving their true selves, their biggest, most expansive selves. Then all these loves are blended into one love – our hearts have been kneaded, softened, tenderized by their love; opened to the love that encompasses us all. All rivers find the ocean, and the ocean refuses no river. As Emerson writes in his essay “Love”:

Thus, are we put in training for a love which knows not sex, nor person, nor partiality, but which seeks virtue and wisdom everywhere.... We need not fear that we can lose anything by the progress of the soul. The soul may be trusted to the end. That which is so beautiful and attractive as these relations, must be succeeded and supplanted only by what is more beautiful, and so on forever.

The Lord works in the sweetest, most wondrous ways. Yes, we see him most easily in the bluest of skies, the wonder of the stars, the faces of flowers, the kindness of the wind that stirs and shakes and washes us clean. But he is also in the darkest, most silent depths of the night, in the absolute loneliness of our existence. And he is in every creature that we have loved and lost. We need not look back to find them, because we will all ultimately become him.



How to Combat the Technology Trap

Technology enables instant access and convenience to foster and feed our desires. Want a new shirt? Order it now. Watch the latest TV show? Stream it now. Attend a popular concert? Buy tickets NOW! But is having so many goods and services literally available at our fingertips really in our best interest? Or is this just another way we are tempted to amass things we may want in the moment yet often don't need? Is all this modernization spiritually conducive? Or does it simply make us prey to more impulsive decision-making?

The Master tells us that when we take anything to an extreme it will begin to cause reactions. We must be the ones controlling our gadgets, not the other way around. Yet the moment we wake up from our sleep, the first thing many of us do is pick up our cellphones and start scrolling through a black hole of content. We consume information at a rate that our mind cannot efficiently process. Then when we sit down to meditate, everything we have watched or thought about comes back to us and attacks our peace of mind. From a spiritual perspective, this clutter scatters our attention, taking us further away from our goal of reaching the eye centre.

The pace at which our lifestyles have changed due to technology is unprecedented. Just 50 years ago this world of touch-screen smartphones and lightning-quick internet would have been impossible to conceive of. We must acknowledge that we need to slow down. The life of a 'Gen-Z' or a millennial is markedly different from those of earlier generations. In some ways, change is good and inevitable. But are we able to adapt to these changes positively, or are we doing a poorer job of making sound decisions and delaying gratification? Teens, preteens, and even younger children are growing up playing computer games, watching TV shows online, and even studying on their tablets. These kids seek out apps for absolutely everything, be it dating, shopping, or learning. Adults are not much better off, as they spend hours browsing, watching, chatting, scrolling, sometimes wasting an entire afternoon or day. Try taking someone's mobile phone away for a few minutes, and they will revolt vehemently. As we form such behavioural patterns, the mind becomes dependent on them and wants to hear no criticism against itself.

As the world evolves, so does our mind's tricks for keeping us trapped in illusion. Social media in particular and technology in general, when not used within the correct checks and balances, have increasingly become nooses around our necks. We must be especially attentive to keep all our guards up and not forget our goal. We must use every minute to make our Master proud and exert full effort to rein in the mind. By now, we understand what a wild and powerful creature it is.

When it comes to reconciling modern life with spirituality, we must acknowledge that it takes a lot of self-control. In *Die to Live*, Maharaj Charan Singh puts it aptly:

Sant Mat teaching is very simple, but to follow it is much more difficult than it looks. It's a constant struggle with the mind, and one has to change one's entire way of life and one's attitude towards life. To follow Sant Mat requires a complete transformation, so it's not easy. One has to sacrifice a lot in life.

What are the changes we must make before it's too late? We have been given all the necessary antidotes to come out unscathed from the fires of the world. We have the gift of simran to keep the mind in check and keep the Father in our thoughts. We have our meditation to quell the senses and have been instructed about the other moral and dietary habits that will keep our karmic burden as light as possible. More than anything, we have an unfailing friend who always gives us the right advice and holds our hand throughout this journey. His love inspires us to be loving; his kindness inspires us to be less harsh; his clear thinking makes us realize how muddled we are; and his presence electrifies us into positive action. We must sustain this inspiration and incorporate a healthy balance of meditation into our daily lives.

Ultimately peace and contentment will be achieved only by reunion with our true Father and freedom from the cycle of birth and death. Let us devote the correct amount of time to our spiritual goals and not lose control of our decision-making ability in our daily life. We must put in the maximum effort possible to fulfill our promises to the Lord, and leave the rest up to his sweet will.



Keep Paddling

When we find ourselves in turbulent and troubled times, we often feel lost. Our friends and family may feel distant; we want to find help, but we don't know where to look.

Maharaj Charan Singh sometimes compared us to logs floating down a river. The current brings us in contact with one another for a while; then it pulls us apart. He reminds us that some family members have already left us and passed on, while we ourselves are preparing to leave others behind. Anyone who has watched pieces of wood floating down a river will have noticed how one current brings them together, and then another disperses them.

It is the same with worldly relationships. A wave of karma arises, and within moments all our relationships are established: brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, friends and acquaintances. Another wave of karma comes, and they scatter, all in their own particular directions.

In our own lives, we might feel that we, too, are in a river. Some days it flows smoothly, tranquilly, serenely. Other days it's more like a run of whitewater rapids, smashing into rocks and tumbling through canyons. We try our best to stay afloat, but we feel we can barely keep our head above water.

Some adventurous folks like to ride in wild rivers for fun, even though there are risks involved. They float in inflated rafts, paddling under the direction of a guide, who leads their passengers through churning rapids as well as smooth, pond-like flows.

The guide sits at the back of the raft and calls out directions to the riders: "Right side forward! Back paddle!" Each rider has a paddle, to pull the boat through still parts of the river and to steer and control the boat in shifting waters. What's most important for the riders is to listen to the guide and follow his or her directions. This keeps the boat and riders both safe and moving toward their goal.

As we make our way through our lives on this path, we may have experiences similar to river rafters, and it may be helpful to know what the river guides have to say. Their directions are simple:

First: Stay in the boat

When we're on a river in a turbulent stretch, our boat may bounce around from one side of the river to the other, and from still water to whirlpools. We may start to panic, not knowing what to do. We may start thinking we could do better if we just jumped out of the boat and started swimming. The boat feels so limiting, and we're sure we can do better on our own.

Similarly, when turbulent times erupt in our own lives, we may feel that the way of life that the Master has given us is too restrictive. We want more freedom and flexibility. The four walls of his commandments – the vows we take at our initiation – may seem like the walls of a jail cell rather than a fortress of protection.

On the river, when the boat is tossing and turning, the guide calls out directions for our safety: "Hold on! Keep your arms and legs inside! Stay in the boat!"

On our personal river journey, when things are going wild all around us and we can't seem to make sense of it all, it is tempting to just jump out. We may feel that this way of life is just impractical or too difficult. Keeping to the diet, monitoring our conduct, and attending to our regular daily practice may feel too burdensome, and we just want out.

Here it is most important to remember the first instruction of the guide: *Stay in the boat*. We may think we might do better in the water on our own, but the guide has seen the river and the troubles ahead. If we're in the water on our own, there is nothing to protect us from the rocks and tree branches that line the river and can pull us under the current. In the boat, we have a structure that can protect us. The Master gives us a way of life that protects us from the dangers of the wild river of circumstances we find ourselves in.

Second: Keep the boat pointing in the right direction

The currents of the river can turn the boat from side to side and even spin it around. The guide is experienced and gives instructions for keeping the boat pointed in the best direction. He may call out, "Right side forward! Left side back!" to keep the boat in the river's moving current so we don't get stuck in still water.

Similarly, the Master advises us to keep our eye on our goal and the main purpose of life – spiritual liberation – and to keep our life circumstances in perspective. Here it is useful to attend satsang, read the books and keep good company. We want to keep our mind pointed in a good direction and at least *know* the right direction to be able to make good choices.

Third: Keep paddling

We have stayed in the boat, and we are keeping our goal in view, so now it's up to us to take action. We need to keep paddling, to maintain our daily meditation practice. The practice is just that – a thing we do every day to keep our boat steady. The river of our karmas is always flowing, and we don't know when or where turbulence may come. We need to keep our paddle in the water – that is, never miss a day of meditation – to stay balanced, keep our perspective and build our strength to face what we must.

Then, as we go on in life, dealing with the ups and downs by following this guidance, we may realize that these instructions also apply when we sit for meditation:

Stay in the boat. Here the boat is the eye centre, where we want to maintain our focus.

Keep the boat pointing in the right direction. The right direction is upward and inward. We want to keep our attention there and keep bringing it back when it goes out.

Keep paddling. Simran and bhajan are the only actions we can take that always keep us moving toward our spiritual goal.



Lifting the Veil

God is not always silent, and man is not always blind. In every man's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil at the horizon of the known, opening a sight of the eternal. Each of us has at least once in his life experienced the momentous reality of God. Each of us has once caught a glimpse of the beauty, peace and power that flow through the souls of those who are devoted to Him. But such experiences are rare events. To some people they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched. The remembrance of that experience and the loyalty to the response of that moment are the forces that sustain our faith.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, *I Asked for Wonder*

* * *

The Lord creates his own love within us. We're just an instrument. We feel that we love him, but actually he is the one who is pulling us from inside. He's the one who is creating that love within us. We become restless to become one with him. The pull starts with him. But we should at least be receptive to the pull. We shouldn't resist the pull, we should be receptive to the pull. The Lord worships himself through us, in other words.... But we have a certain part to play, so the part is being played through us. Without his grace, nobody can worship him, nobody can love him – because we're all blind. We are lost in this illusion. And we could never think about the Lord unless he creates those facilities, that opportunity, that atmosphere in which we can build our meditation. If that atmosphere is not there, that opportunity is not there, that environment is not there, what can we do? So, everything is in his hands.

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



My Restless Mind

*My restless mind doesn't listen to me –
how can I deal with it?*

*The Master always advises and explains the method,
and I sit in satsang with an attentive mind.*

*When I listen to his words I deeply repent of my actions,
but then the mind deceives me again and I go astray.*

*I devise many ways of my own to crush this mind,
but I never get to the threshold of Surat Shabd,
so how can I rise to the inner sky?*

Sar Bachan Poetry, 19:4

In this shabd Soami Ji tells us about the struggle with the mind. The mind refuses to obey or listen to the Master's advice. It is amazing how we continue to fail miserably at controlling our weaknesses and desires while we attempt to tread this path of spiritual enlightenment. What is the solution to this dilemma? How can we deal with it?

Master tells us the method over and over again, but beyond his process, the mind deceives us and we may try to come up with other ways to try to deal with the ravages of desires, attachments and maya. In addition to not listening to the Master's directions, we continue to repeat mistakes, over and over and over again. How can we expect to crush the mind and rise to the inner sky if we don't follow the Master's directions? Indeed, our condition is that the mind is crushing us. The mind is so addicted to maya it sometimes makes us feel out of control – crushed. Even the Great Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh, quoted in Call of the Great Master, said, "I possess no merits and my mind has thoroughly crushed me," when he was asked how to pray.

In the poem quoted above, Soami Ji tells us that he has devised many ways of his own to try and crush his mind. But that's part of our problem – we are incapable of doing the crushing! The Master tells us over and over to just do our meditation every day and he will do the rest. Without the Master's grace, success is impossible. In Sar Bachan Poetry, Soami Ji says:

*Why don't you give up your lust for Maya,
the seductress who is always chasing after you?*

*Practise the Name given by the Master
for without his grace
you can never release yourself from her grip.
Contemplate on the form of the Master within you
and keep your mind in check.
The gracious Master is full of compassion,
helping and protecting you at every moment.*

Baba Jaimal Singh explains our situation to the Great Master in *Spiritual Letters*:

Regarding bhajan and simran, you write that your mind gives you a lot of trouble, that it does not let you do bhajan and simran, and aimlessly creates waves and ripples. This is the mind's job, my son, because it is the creator of all gross and subtle evil tendencies.... To stay within the directives of the perfect Guru is the real work, my son.... You, however, ignore the Guru's will and bring your self in between, and this allows the mind also to put forth its demands.

So many times, the ego takes on ownership of our efforts to reach some spiritual height, and when our efforts appear to be futile, we become frustrated and complain to Master that we cannot do it. But, as Great Master and Hazur have told us: If you can't bring me your successes, then bring me your failures. The Master often says that he can't make it any easier for us – we have to make our own efforts. We just need to sit and let go, even as our minds look for results and constantly judges our poor effort and crushes us. Baba Ji has not directed us to attain great insights or stand on our heads and meditate. All we have to do is sit and knock on his door at the third eye, to seek him – to show our love, only that.

There is a story of the man who lived in a hut near a large rock. One day while praying to God, God told him that his job was to push on this large rock with all his strength. So, he set about doing that every day, even though he never managed to move the rock an inch. For years he pushed on the rock without fail and without any results. One day, in great frustration, he lamented to God, saying, “I have been pushing on this rock for years, and I have not moved it an inch. I have accomplished nothing.”

God answers him saying, “You have accomplished a lot, my son. You are so much stronger now. Look at your muscles; you are fit for a long journey.”

“But I did not move the rock” the man complained.

God answered: “I did not ask you to move the rock, only to push on it with all your strength. Now you are strong and fit, and I will move the rock for you.”

We are like this man trying to move a huge rock. We think we must accomplish enlightenment, forgetting that our job is just to sit and still our body and mind. God will do the rest. Baba Ji has said so often that all we can do is simran, and the rest will happen automatically. Making ourselves fit and reining in the mind is slow and steady work; progress is imperceptible on a day-to-day basis. Our motivation to continue doing our meditation is not to make great spiritual gains or have inner experiences to satisfy our ego, but rather to show our faith and love for the Master and invoke his grace. Soami Ji reminds us of this when he says:

*I carry your burdens in my own heart
so that you may be free of worries
and nurture my love in your heart.
Give up your misgivings, be steadfast in your love –
a love tempered with faith.
I shall myself help you put in the effort,
I shall myself take you to your ultimate home.
Listen to what Radha Soami has to say:
all will be worked out
as and when the supreme will ordains it.*

Sar Bachan Poetry, 33:16

This is a path of love: anything can be accomplished with love! We are just to do our part, our effort – as little as it is – and he will take us when we are fit and strong enough to make the transition. Live within his love and devotion every day. If we look on everything that happens as God’s will, we can then sit, relax and let go – it’s that simple. No more restless mind, no more crushing!



What Have We Learned?

One of the themes Baba Ji has emphasized in his question-and-answer sessions on the RSSB website is that we are in this world to learn. Certainly, during the first two years of the Covid pandemic we learned a lot, as we were confronted with decisions about how to spend our time and about what we value. For most of those two years, we lived without satsang, and with little or no physical contact with the Master. Many of us realized that all we really have is our meditation. We could not avoid the stark reality that, when the world seemed to be falling apart around us, this was the one thing we could do for ourselves. Meditation was our gift from the Master, our lifeline, our support – we could sit down and let go of our worries, our fears, our incessant thoughts.

And Baba Ji's responses to questions gave us another gift of being relieved of our expectations of what our meditation should be. We learned that we didn't have to be concerned with results, just our efforts. All we need to do is sit down, repeat five words, and let go – of expectations, events of the world, work, plans for the future.

Baba Ji told us over and over to take advantage of our forced disengagement from the world. But did we? Maybe our mind, our biggest enemy, was in full attack mode during the pandemic. It generated fear, worry, disbelief, procrastination, obsessive doomscrolling, and so much else. We heard questioners ask Baba Ji our own internal questions and voice our complaints: I can't sit, I can't concentrate, my mind won't let me meditate, I'm afraid to close my eyes, I'm worried about my family, my body shakes. And then, there was the ultimate plea – Baba Ji, you have to do it for me! But his relentless reply was always that we must do our own meditation; he cannot do it for us. His eating food cannot satisfy our hunger; we have to eat for ourselves to satisfy our hunger.

It is that hunger – our spiritual hunger – that ultimately will drive us to meditate. Hazur Maharaj Ji explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

You see, it's a constant struggle with the mind.... Without hunger, you won't sit in meditation at all, and without meditation you won't be able to increase your hunger. Hunger is there – that is why we sit in meditation.

Whether we are able to concentrate or not, that's a different thing. But hunger is there, need is there – that is why we are devoting our time to meditation. There will be more hunger, a greater intensity of hunger, when you give more time to meditation. Hunger automatically will increase.

Even missing the Master's physical presence can serve a purpose. Hazur wrote in *Die To Live*: “This longing for the physical form, this longing which you cannot fulfill, leads you within towards the Radiant Form of the Master, which will ultimately take you back to the Father.”

“Back to the Father” – isn't that where we want to go? Baba Jaimal Singh also explains the power of spiritual hunger – our urge to merge with Master within: “Whenever the mind thinks of inner darshan, the Shabd-dhun is at your service. Just attach your attention to it and you will receive the benefit of darshan – you will receive its fruit to the extent that your heart yearns for it.”

Such is the power of yearning. But how do we awaken that hunger, that yearning? Maharaj Sawan Singh (Great Master) explains in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. II, that there are two ways of awakening our love. One is through the grace of the Master, and the other is through spiritual practice. He explains how those two work together:

In actual practice, the first essential is to awaken love for God by means of repetition [simran] and then by contemplation [on the Master's inner form]. As we repeat the five Holy Names, our attraction and love for him increase within ourselves.... Simran, done with faith, produces a unique feeling in the heart. By doing simran a feeling of bliss and divine influence fills the heart.

And then Great Master explains: “part of the spiritual practice is listening to the Shabd, Nam or Sound Current.... As the soul contacts Shabd, Love flows out from within.”

This divine love is accessible to all of us – at our eye centre, where our Shabd Master is always with us, where we lose our I-ness or ego and can hear the divine melody of Shabd and see the light of God. This is true love, and it can be awakened only by our daily two and a half hours of meditation.

Both awareness and longing awaken our need to meditate and thus turn us inward toward our Master. As Great Master writes in *Spiritual Gems*:

The whole beauty ... lies in the Word and its practice. Because the saints are rare and the Word cannot be had except from a living saint, and the practice of the Word is no joke, ... without the grasp of the Word there is no awakening of the soul, no victory over the mind and senses, no development of the positive qualities and no banishment of evil.

Our suffering ends only when our soul is awakened, when we merge in the Word by living the teachings, attending to our simran and bhajan, and leaning into our Master at all times. We can help ourselves and increase our receptivity by putting into practice the instructions we receive at the time of initiation. All that the Masters ask of us is to attend to our meditation, let go of our illusions, and “lean into” our Master for everything.

The Masters stress that intense longing is essential and is actually a prerequisite for meeting the Lord. This longing is described as a surge “like a wave or current in the heart,” an agony that is “assuaged by continuous remembrance and contemplation of the Lord.” To live through such intense longing may be difficult and painful, but it is a steppingstone to the divine love within us. The Masters explain that eventually it leads us to everlasting connection with our Master, and because of that, we don’t want to give it up.

The Masters give us the solution to our unhappiness: live in the Lord’s will and accept our destiny, which cannot be changed anyway. Our destiny was created by the Lord from our own karmas. It is designed for our spiritual benefit and is part of our awakening to the God within us. In fact, we are born with the inherent capacity to hear God’s voice and see his light.

We need the help of the Master, and we receive it. The truth is, we have everything we need to become spiritually conscious – self-realized – while living our lives. That is the goal of initiation, and meditation is the means. As Great Master tells us in *Spiritual Gems*, “The inner Master gives all the grace and help that the disciple is capable of receiving, no matter where he may be. The Master is within him.”

In the end, as Hazur wrote to an initiate:

It is right and proper and natural for the soul to give its love to the Lord, for there is a natural affinity between the Part and the Whole.... But as a consequence of association with the mind, the soul offers its love to this world, its faces and things. This is an unworthy gift that we make to this world. Our love naturally belongs to the Lord, and it should be offered to none else but to Him. If we offer our love to this world and its denizens, the consequence is unhappiness, frustration, disappointment and ignominy, whereas in offering it [our love] to the Lord, we find fulfillment, perfection and fruition.

The Masters' advice doesn't change, no matter our circumstances or in what time period we live. We will be able to turn away from the world only when we do our meditation regularly and lovingly. As Hazur wrote to this initiate:

The Master loves us steadfastly and never leaves us. Let us build our faith in him and turn to him for everything in life. Let us be psychologically turned to the Master and let us be looking to him every moment of our life.

If we have learned anything about the Master's love for us during the time when the pandemic forced us to face ourselves, perhaps it is a renewed appreciation for the many gifts he gives us – spiritual hunger, intense longing, acceptance of his grace, discipline – that lead our soul to his divine love through meditation.



Loving Focus

Imagine you're driving a car on a busy highway going 70 to 75 miles per hour. Cars going more than 80 miles per hour speed by in adjacent lanes. Some cars are cutting from one lane to another; there is lots of traffic. Seated next to you is your beloved, the person whom you love most in the world. Now, at that moment, how could you possibly embrace your loved one and lose yourself in the depth of your love? You absolutely could not. Due to your need to focus on the traffic, keep your eyes on the road and your hands on the wheel, you could not possibly enjoy an embrace. The only way that you could hug your beloved would be to find a quiet place and pull over.

In a similar manner, if, at the time of meditation, our minds are going 75 miles an hour, we cannot possibly enjoy the bliss of meditation. If we are focused on all the worldly activities that require our attention during the day, then we cannot enjoy the spiritual embrace of our Master within. Meditation is our opportunity to slow down, pull over, halt the busy machinations of the mind, and lose ourselves in the love of our Master.

Our full attention needs to be given to meditation. Without our full attention, we really can't call it meditation at all; we're merely engaged in mechanical repetition. We mechanically repeat the five holy names, while at the same time we allow our mind to wander about. If we think about other things while performing simran, we are not giving simran the attention it deserves. Simran must be done wholeheartedly.

At the time of meditation, our mind must become completely one-pointed. When our concentration is complete, we will hear the sound of God, the Shabd, and our souls will rise up to the inner skies. In the Hebrew scriptures it is said that the Lord is a jealous God. He is called jealous because even one thought, one inclination towards the world instead of towards him, will result in the inner door remaining closed.

When the mind wanders off, we must bring it back. It helps to remember why we are sitting in the first place. The Master has given us the practice of simran – repetition of five holy names with the attention fixed at the eye centre. One thought which goes astray can pull the mind out and prevent us from enjoying our spiritual practice.

But of course, concentrating at the eye centre is difficult, often the struggle of a lifetime. Maharaj Sawan Singh, in *Spiritual Gems*, describes the difficulty of concentration:

[It] is not so easy without long practice. However, by and by, the mind becomes accustomed to staying in the centre. It rebels less and less, and finally yields to the demand to hold to the centre.... Before that, the mind will not remain still for a long time. It jumps around like a monkey.

In this same letter, Great Master goes on to explain the need for exerting our will:

It is a matter of will to hold to the centre, also not to forget nor allow the attention to go off after some other thought or experiences.... A keenly awakened intelligence must hold to the centre, steadily, every moment. If any thought enters the consciousness, jerk the mind back to the centre and hold it there. Make the spirit, instead of the mind, the commander of the situation.

We easily forget, and then the mind drops down. Therefore, our mind must remain keenly attentive, purposefully engaged, repeating each word of simran slowly and deliberately. This is the most important thing in our life, and it deserves our full and absolute attention.

Sometimes the obstacles to concentration are external. Besides the inherent difficulties of concentrating within, worldly circumstances might also interfere with our spiritual life. Great Master encourages us never to give up:

Let nothing stop or hinder you. Let no earthly obstacles stand in your way of going inside. Set your mind steadfastly upon that and make all else subordinate to that, and other things will melt away and leave you free.

To a certain extent, this is a matter of priorities. When we make meditation our priority, we will somehow always be able to make time for it, come what may.

The following story deals with facing obstacles on the path. In ancient times, a king had a boulder placed on a roadway. Then he hid and watched to see if anyone would remove it. People mostly walked around it.

Many people loudly blamed the king for not keeping the roads clear. A few gave the large rock a push, but when it failed to budge, they gave it up and continued along their way.

Then a peasant came along carrying a load of vegetables. Upon approaching the boulder, the peasant laid down his burden and tried to move the stone to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded.

After the peasant picked up his load of vegetables, he noticed a purse lying in the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king that said the gold was for whomever removed the boulder from the road.

There is an important lesson here. Every obstacle we face presents an opportunity for us to improve our condition and discover the hidden treasure that lies within.

Let us remember these sweet words of the Great Master:

No matter what may be your difficulties and deficiencies, they shall all be overcome, and the divine Shabd whose music never ceases within you shall sooner or later bear you upon its loving waves back to your original home. Have no fear or doubt.



The Fifth Dacoit

A huge challenge that spiritual seekers must overcome are the five passions of lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride. They are often referred to as the five deadly sins, the five thieves, or the five dacoits. They intoxicate the senses and lead the mind astray, driving the soul under the wheel of eighty-four, farther and farther away from our true home with the Lord. Of these, the fifth dacoit, pride, or ego, is the most difficult to conquer.

Pride is often referred to as the greatest of human frailties, the deadliest sin. At its worst, it makes us arrogant and conceited, constantly wanting praise, and unwilling to accept being wrong. Even when we try to rid ourselves of it, our attempt at control makes us feel proud. At the same time, the ego is a necessary faculty which gives us awareness of the self and allows us to function in this world. But when pride exaggerates our ego, it turns into egotism and narcissism. As I-ness overtakes us, we begin to think of everything in terms of “me and mine.” The necessary faculty for functioning in the world turns into a devouring cancer of egocentricity.

How do we know if we suffer from the cancer of pride, of self-absorption? We can find the answer by observing our everyday behaviour. Do we talk more about ourselves, or do we ask others to talk about themselves? Do we constantly brag, or do we keep quiet and let others talk? Do we take credit for others’ work?

A story is told of two ducks flying, each holding the two ends of a stick in their bills, with a frog hanging on to the middle of the stick with its mouth. A farmer looked up and said, “What a clever idea! I wonder who thought of it.” The frog at once opened his mouth and said, “I did” and fell to his death. That was the end of the story for the frog. When we honestly look at ourselves, what we find might give us pause.

Do we think we are always right? Under the influence of pride, we think that we are infallible and that anyone who has a different opinion is wrong. The difficult part about candidly evaluating ourselves is that we do not even realize when we are wrong, and we rigidly adhere to our belief, even becoming arrogant and self-righteous.

Next, we need to ask ourselves if we think we are better than others. Do we feel proud of our appearance, family, wealth, and so on? C.S. Lewis, the British novelist and lay theologian, warns us:

As long as you are proud you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people: and, of course, as long as you are looking down you cannot see something that is above you.

This sense of superiority drives us to get a bigger house, a fancier car, a larger TV, whether we need them or not, because we derive pleasure from possessing status symbols and the latest electronics. The antidote is also in Lewis's words: we have to do those things that help us look up, towards the Lord, rather than down on other people. Sant Kabir puts us in our place:

*O Kabir, be not proud of your body –
It's just bones wrapped in skin.
Those who rode on stately horses
With a royal canopy over their head
Now lie buried deep.*

Everything associated with the body – youth, strength, beauty, wealth, fame, power, prestige – are perishable and do not go with us when we leave this world. Why do we think it's so important to impress others? After all, when we are ready to depart this world, no one will be there to help us or go with us. As the English poet William Wordsworth says:

It seems now of little moment how long I may be remembered. When a man pushes off in his little boat into the great seas of infinity and eternity, it surely signifies little how long he is kept in sight by watchers on the shore.

We can also ask ourselves if we are victims of “conspicuous consumption,” loving to show off and be in the limelight. Trying to dazzle others with a display of bravado, possessions, connections, talent and so on, reinforces the feeling of superiority. Soami Ji asks: “O mind, why be proud! One day this body will mingle with dust and you will be cast back into the cycle of birth and death.” Everything is temporary in this creation, so why we should be proud when we are in bondage to the karmic cycle.

We need to be mindful of how our pride affects the spiritual journey of our soul. Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh says:

Ego is a block between us and God. It is a definite block and a very solid block. Without elimination of the ego, the question of meeting the Lord doesn't arise at all.

What could be clearer? If our purpose in life is to achieve God-realization, we must first remove the barrier of ego. Many mystics and poets have described this process metaphorically as “cutting off one’s head” – to wrestle with ego and take it out of the picture. We can accomplish this only by surrendering ourselves, totally and unconditionally, to the Master. Hazur says, “Elimination of ego is submission to the Master.”

The Master graces us with initiation and teaches us the technique of meditation. Once we are under his refuge and grace, our submission implies obedience to his every word: we should diligently follow his instructions, putting in our effort and leaving the rest to him. Hazur lays it out clearly: “Only by the spiritual practice, only by that meditation, can we kill the ego.”

Gradually, the fifth dacoit will be driven out, but only through meditation. Hazur leaves no room for doubt:

Meditation, meditation. I wish I could tell you some short cut. If there is so much rust on a knife, there is no other way but to rub it against the sandstone. Go on rubbing, go on rubbing, go on rubbing, and someday it will shine. That is the only way to get rid of the rust from the soul, from the mind. There is no other way.

This is a terrific analogy and a striking picture – we can literally see the rusty knife being rubbed on the sandstone, over and over again, the sparks flying as the rust is removed, a gleaming blade slowly emerging. By the Master’s grace, our karma will be ground down on the sandstone of meditation, along with our ego, and our soul will shine.



A Precious Goodbye to Loneliness

I've many old things
I can't use anymore –
But I don't know where to put them!

So, maybe you know of a place,
Near an unlocked door?

Because my attic-brain is nearly
Bursting at the seams
With old treasures! Dearest friends' photos,
And many broken, withered dreams.

All things purchased, hardly used,
Never worn
Old? Well, not really,
But hardly torn!

Just felt like saying goodbye,
To reassure friends.

You see, Nothing
Nothing out there is real,
Not even this body that
We call “me.”

It can't be re-used,
And “I” can't be hurt again.
Because we're never alone.

Just felt like saying
a precious goodbye
to loneliness,
My oldest, dearest
Ex-best friend.



BOOK REVIEW

The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson

EDITED BY BROOKS ATKINSON

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Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882), author, essayist, lecturer, and philosopher, has been one of the modern world's most influential thinkers, still widely read and quoted 200 years after his birth. He was unorthodox, controversial, plainspoken, and unwavering in his conviction that God was to be found within, not in any outward form of religion or practice. After attending one of his lectures, the writer Harriet Martineau observed:

There is a vague nobleness and thorough sweetness about him, which move people to their very depths, without their being able to explain why. The logicians have an incessant triumph over him, but their triumph is of no avail. He conquers minds, as well as hearts, wherever he goes; and without convincing anybody's reason of any one thing, exalts their reason, and makes their minds worth more than they ever were before.

Emerson experienced the loss of close family members at an early age; during his childhood he lost his father and three of his siblings. Later, after only eighteen months of marriage, he lost his beloved wife. He was a minister but had grown increasingly disillusioned with the outward rituals of traditional Christianity. Eighteen months after his wife's death he resigned from the ministry. The poet Mary Oliver writes in the Introduction, "From this point on, the greater energies of his life found their sustenance in the richness and steadfastness of his inner life." He had realized "the heart's spiritual awakening as the true work of our lives."

He set off on a voyage of discovery to Europe, where he attended lectures by leading scientists and met eminent authors including Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, and William Wordsworth. While there he had an epiphany of the interrelatedness of all beings that included all of nature and of man. In his journal he noted, "There is a correspondence between the human soul and everything that exists in the world; more properly, everything that is known to man." In his essay *Nature* he writes:

*Standing on the bare ground – my head bathed by the blithe air and
uplifted into infinite space – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a
transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal
Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.*

On his voyage home to America, he wrote in his journal, “In the hands of a true Teacher, the falsehoods, the pitifulnesses, the sectarianisms of each [religion] are dropped, and the sublimity and the depth of the Original is penetrated and exhibited to men.” He believed now in “the infinity of wisdom that issues from meditation.” He wrote, “It is one light which beams out of a thousand stars. It is one soul that animates all men.” Emerson believed that it is each person’s responsibility to open up to that light and to its wisdom. When we do this, we access the treasures that await all people. He wrote, “There is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens.... A light shines through us upon things, and makes us aware that we are nothing, but the light is all.”

Emerson continued to learn and to experience throughout his life. He explored the philosophies of Plato, Hegel, Kant, and many others. He was close personal friends with Henry David Thoreau, Bronson Alcott, Margaret Fuller, and Coleridge. He was a dedicated student of the Bhagavad Gita and the Sufis, including Hafez, Rumi, and Jami. He believed that “at the deep end of the pool, where it matters, Western and Eastern are profoundly alike, indeed, identical.”

Emerson believed that all humanity has access to the “divinity within,” “that great nature in which we rest ... that Unity, that Over-Soul, within which every man’s particular being is contained and made one with all other; that common heart.” He understood that the only way to reach the portal of the Over-Soul, the realm of God, is through solitary prayer and meditation. He wrote that if a person “would know what the great God speaketh, he must ‘go into his closet and shut the door’ as Jesus said.... He must greatly listen to himself.”

The theme of turning toward God is a constant in his essays and poetry.

*Henceforth, please God, forever I forego
The yoke of men’s opinions. I will be
Light-hearted as a bird, and live with God.
I find him in the bottom of my heart,
I hear continually his voice therein.*

Having unique access to the divine, each person can participate in the glory of the divine. In his essay *History* he writes:

*I am owner of the sphere,
Of the seven stars and the solar year,
Of Caesar's hand and Plato's brain,
Of lord Christ's heart, and Shakespeare's strain.*

He explains: "What Plato has thought, he may think; what a saint has felt, he may feel; what at any time has befallen any man, he can understand. Who hath access to this universal mind is a party to all that is or can be done."

Such beliefs led Emerson naturally to a continually positive outlook and aspect. He says: "To a stout heart, there is no danger. To a good head, no problem is inscrutable. To a good foot, no place is slippery. To a good sailor, every wind has something of his course in it. To good hands, nothing is impossible." But his optimism was for the soul's capacities, not for worldly conditions. The calamity of war – Emerson was in Paris during the French Revolution of 1848 – further strengthened this conviction. "It is always becoming evident that the permanent good is for the soul only, and cannot be retained in any society or system." He urges all to access their strength from the power within and not from institutions, customs, or theologies.

Let a Stoic open the resources of man and tell men they are not leaning willows, but can and must detach themselves; that with the exercise of self-trust, new powers shall appear; that a man is the word made flesh.... And that the moment he acts from himself, tossing the laws, the books, idolatries, and customs out of the window, we pity him no more but thank and revere him.

Emerson understood the transience of all activity in the outward world: "Life itself is a bubble and a skepticism, and a sleep within a sleep ... but thou, God's darling! heed thy private dream, ... stay there in thy closet, and toil.... Thy life is a flitting state, a tent for a night, and do thou, sick or well, finish that stint." Yet even in the transient physical world one may perceive a true and everlasting reality. "Underneath the inharmonious and trivial particulars, is a musical perfection, the Ideal journeying always with us, the heaven without rent or seam."

Emerson's essays can be read and re-read; they offer inspiration and ever-deeper insights into the realization of the truth within. He writes that when

God “fires the heart with his presence, ... it inspires in man an infallible trust. He has not the conviction, but the sight, that the best is the true.... He is sure that his welfare is dear to the heart of being.... He believes that he cannot escape from his good.” Emerson assures the reader, “The things that are really for thee gravitate to thee.” Above all, the seeker of the truth must simply continue and not give up:

Patience and patience, we shall win at the last. We must be very suspicious of the deceptions of the element of time. It takes a good deal of time to eat or to sleep, or to earn a hundred dollars, and a very little time to entertain a hope and an insight which becomes the light of our life.... Never mind the ridicule, never mind the defeat: up again, old heart!



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