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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Don't Run Back to the World

The gift arrives in the middle of the night.
The icy wind of emptiness
bangs open your front door
and chills you to the bone.

When this happens to anyone,
they run to the warm bed of the world
and are lulled back to sleep
for the rest of their lives.

Don't run back to the world.
Fall ... into the arms of loneliness.
Embrace this bittersweet longing,
this horrid homesickness.
Become a sacred wound
raging with the pain of exile.

For in the unseen world of spirit,
this loneliness is a drop of heaven
that fell into your heart on earth.

This longing is a breeze from home,
wafting the fragrance
of your Beloved to you.

This pain is the last hour of darkness
before the garden of your being
blossoms into springtime at dawn.

Don't run back to the world.
Close your eyes.
Peer into the window within you
that opens on to the secret sky.
Listen to your Beloved calling to you
in the night.

Look!
There in the darkness –
his voice is the sound of light,
a path of luminous music
streaming through the stars.
Follow where it leads you. Follow.
Your dazzling future is about to unfold.



*Come friends, let us sing a song
to welcome to this world the primal Lord,
our friend of ages past.
Like flowers in the spring
our hearts blossom when he arrives.
He has assumed the name 'Radha Soami'
to reveal the secrets of Alakh and Agam.
He has set in motion the train of Surat Shabd
to carry souls to the inaccessible region of Agam Alok.
He has started the ever-flowing stream of satsang
and he sings without cease
the praises of Radha Soami.
Let us offer our hearts to him with all our love
and end the agony of Kal's web.*

Sar Bachan Poetry, Bachan 1, Shabd 1



Baking the Cake of Our Consciousness

Spiritual awakening is about realizing who we really are. Saints tell us that embedded in our everyday reality is a field of pure awareness consisting of love, intelligence, and peace. However, we don't have access to this true reality because we're conditioned to believe only our physical senses; so, if we don't see, hear, feel, smell, touch, or taste something, it doesn't exist. Our attention is riveted on people, objects, and places, and our obsessive attachment to our goals, plans, and problems traps us in this dense material plane of creation.

The saints tell us that the reason we suffer is because we focus most of our attention on ephemeral things of this world. To end our misery, we need to turn our focus inward to what is permanent, through the practice of meditation.

To begin this process of reversing our attention, we must think objectively instead of reacting on autopilot, defaulting to our long-held negative mental patterns. We start with good intentions and clear resolutions, but the gap between our former self and the new self is so uncomfortable that soon we slip back into old habits and give up.

Most of us try to change by substituting positive thoughts and feelings for negative ones, hoping that this will transform us and make us happy. This is a good start, but it's difficult to sustain. Instead, we must permanently raise our level of consciousness. One could compare this transformation to baking a cake – a consciousness cake.

Imagine that we've decided to make an amazing cake with the best ingredients in the world. First, we visit a remote monastery in Eastern Europe to purchase expensive flour that's been hand ground by monks chanting holy scriptures as they were grinding the wheat. Then we fly off to Hawaii and hike three days to a sacred waterfall near a volcano to find a unique type of sugar. Next, we travel to South America to purchase rare chocolate harvested by a hermit living in the rain forest. Then we're off to Switzerland to buy butter from cows that children prayed over so that the milk would vibrate with divine energy.

Finally, we fly home with all these valuable ingredients and invite all our friends over. We dazzle them with stories of the adventures we had gathering these rare ingredients and show them selfies from the exotic locations we visited. We get super-excited reliving our journey and the encounters we had with all the mysterious and wise people we met along the way.

There's only one problem: where's the cake? The cake is not the exotic ingredients or the challenging trip to procure them. It's not photos, techniques, or affirmations about how delicious the cake is going to be. The cake is the result of what happens when certain ingredients are mixed together and baked at a particular temperature. We need heat to bake the cake; in our case, it's a kind of inner spiritual heat produced through meditation, which melts away our impurities and reveals our true form, the soul.

The saints give us foolproof instructions for how to bake our consciousness cake, but some of us haven't followed their recipe. Others of us are at various stages in the baking process. Many of us are impatient, constantly opening the oven door, doubting the entire baking process and asking, "Why is this taking so long? Why does it have to be so hard?"

Well, we're in a hot oven, so it's not going to be comfortable. The saints, however, are expert bakers. They are in charge: it's their recipe, their timing, their decision about which ingredients to use, and their judgment on when we are done. They caution us to keep on baking. When our cake is done, everything we started with will be transmuted. The process of spiritual baking will make us so delicious and sweet that the Lord will not be able to resist us.

The saints shift our consciousness at a fundamental level. They do not focus on making our egos feel better or improving the outer trappings of our lives. Rather, their purpose is to transform us so that we achieve self- and God-realization.

But making changes and breaking free of our negative patterns is hard. Scientists say that by the time we're 35 years old, 95 percent of who we are is a set of memorized behaviours, emotional reactions, beliefs, and attitudes that function subconsciously like an automatic computer program.

So, if we are so heavily programmed, how do we break free from our past conditioning and our limited thoughts and beliefs?

The answer is that we can't do this on our own. This is where grace and love come in. It's the divine design of creation that the Lord exerts a constant magnetic pull on his beloved souls scattered throughout creation and clothed in various bodies. That magnetic pull is love, which is also called Nam.

Our effort to practice meditation and live the teachings will help push the needle of our consciousness toward the magnet of Nam. Then, through God's grace, we will experience the magnet's pull, permanently transforming us through the radiant light and sound of Nam.

Mystics tell us that joy is our true nature, while suffering is the activity of the ego. We don't experience joy because we identify with our lower egoic mind, which is constantly seeking or resisting and is dominated by layers of discontent, tension, and other negative emotions. Some of the signs that our lower mind is dominating us are: We're afraid to be alone without constant stimulation, sensual gratification, and distractions. We live in a state of anxiety, fear, and uneasiness. We disdain the shortcomings of others and ourselves. We strive to be unique, right, and special. We're resentful and easily hurt, and we create stories and build cases to justify our desires and weaknesses. We're totally engrossed in getting what we want and avoiding what we don't want, no matter the cost. And finally, we feel justified in complaining and groaning when life and other people don't bend to our will.

It's our own mind that creates our unhappiness. But as we wake up to the reality that this nightmare is of our own making, we begin to realize that if we want lasting happiness, our primary purpose must be to let go of all our negativity and return to the Lord. Doing this isn't easy. It's usually a slow and sometimes frustrating process, complicated by our many attachments, compulsions, faulty attitudes, and life's ups and downs. In from *self to Shabd*, the author writes:

Our transformation begins when we become aware of where we keep our attention. For most of us, our attention is in the drama of our karma. We are more interested in manipulating our karmas than in accepting them. We are more interested in having and doing, rather than in being. Having and doing do not lead to peace of mind. Being does. If we would only give

half a percent of our time to that which could awaken us from this dream, we would have been awakened by now. But unfortunately we keep all our attention in our human experience. We can change that, but to keep our cool in the face of terrible circumstances is a state achieved only by doing daily meditation and lots of simran during the day. Only with such daily discipline can our mind become anchored in the peaceful serenity of Shabd.

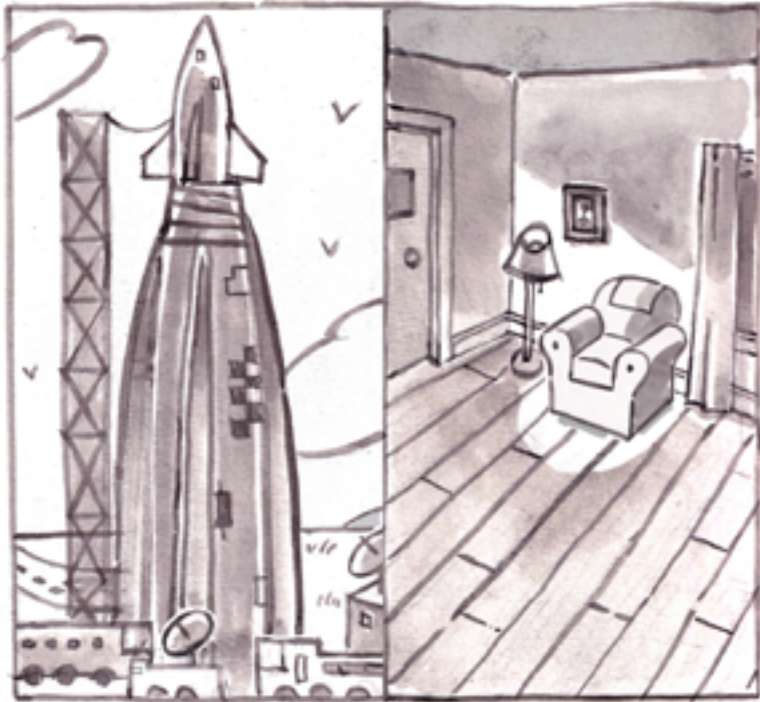
Sant Mat is a mystical path beyond the limits of ordinary experience. We can't realize the presence of the inner Master unless we radically shift our energy from an outward to an inward focus. Until we do the necessary inner work, all talk of spirituality is pointless. However, let's not approach this as just another task on our to-do list. Meditation is a gift, an oasis of awareness, and the nourishment we badly need to heal our restless, suffering mind and spirit.

The saints come to break us out of the prison that is our mind by shaking up our fixed ideas and challenging us to focus on something real and true. When we finally wise up, we realize that if we want to stop suffering, we must stop relying on the world outside of us and instead depend on the Shabd Master within us. Only then will we get serious about doing our spiritual work because we finally accept that it's the only sane choice we have; if we miss this opportunity to break free, we will continue to suffer.

Let's face it: we live such small lives, clinging to everything and everyone. All the while, the treasure of the Lord's love is permeating us and the very air we breathe, just waiting for us to surrender to it. We are invited to return home to the peace of our being. Though God appears hidden to us, he has left a shining trail of love that brings us right to his door. Love is the portal, the key, and God's greatest gift to us. All we can do is thank him for his mercy and follow the instructions given by the saints.



Launch Pad



Outer-Space Vehicle

Inner-Space Vehicle



*Living is not a private affair of the individual.
Living is what man does with God's time,
What man does with God's world.*

I Asked for Wonder



Living the Vertical Life

We all remember the question, “Why did the chicken cross the road?” The somewhat humorous answer is “to get to the other side.”

There is a cartoon labeled “Chicken Poetry Reading” which gives us a different slant on this question. In the cartoon, a wise chicken is reading the following poem:

Chicken Road
The Crossing is within.
There is no other side.

This simple poem describes some of the fundamental teachings of the saints.

The saints tell us that everything we seek to attain lasting happiness, everything we seek to obtain true knowledge, everything we seek to obtain peace and bliss, and everything we seek to obtain God-realization lies within us.

Yet we seek these things on the other side of the road. We spend our whole lives thinking that what we need is on the other side of the road. The grass is always greener. This new job, this new car, this new house, this new person, this new treatment, this new investment will make us happy. Yet cars break down, work makes us tense, houses fall into disrepair, investments go up and down. We spend our lives crossing roads in search of fulfillment and happiness only to find disappointment. Yet all along, true happiness is waiting within.

Look at the example of our isolation during Covid. We missed our friends; we missed our co-workers; we could not go to the movies; we felt isolated. Over time, we realized how peaceful it was to remain at home. We were able to spend more time in meditation; we had question-and-answer sessions; we avoided the traffic and fuss of the daily grind. So, when things opened up, we were suddenly miserable that we had to commute in traffic. We were back to all the distractions and conflicts. We missed going out and then we missed being able to stay home.

This is like everything in life. We want it; we get it; we don't want it.

We spend our time living a horizontal life, crossing roads instead of traveling on the road that will lead us to happiness. But our humble poet is telling us that the only crossing that is worthwhile is within and that is the crossing from the world of illusion to the world of reality.

The saints teach us to live a vertical life. The horizontal life is chasing after the illusions of this world. The vertical life is the inner road. The horizontal life is paved with illusion. The vertical life is paved with truth. The horizontal life takes us away from the Lord. The vertical life takes us toward the Lord. The inner road protects us, while the outer roads subject us to all kinds of travails.

The quarantine during Covid provides us with another interesting analogy. In March of 2020, Baba Ji sent us all a message:

We need to stand with all our brothers and sisters at this crucial time and show our support and sensitivity by fulfilling our social responsibilities. Therefore all are requested to comply and follow the directions to stay where they reside. Please exercise extreme caution where your health is concerned and refrain from any travel that is not absolutely necessary.

Let us take the liberty to analyze these instructions. The Master tells us the human birth is a “crucial time” in which we can fulfill our “spiritual responsibilities.” He tells us to follow his directions and stay inside the walls of his teachings. He always tells us to exercise extreme caution with regard to our spiritual health. Don’t venture out into the trappings of the mind, the trappings of the world. Just do what is absolutely necessary. Live simply and stay within.

Maharaj Charan Singh said in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III:

The pity is that what we see, we are not supposed to love and what we don’t see, we are supposed to love. What we see doesn’t exist; what we don’t see really exists; and that is the whole tragedy of our love. So, we have to love him whom we don’t see at all and who is everywhere. All that we see will perish; nothing of it is real.

Truth and inner peace will never be found on the horizon because one can never get there. So instead, climb the ladder that is within us to reach that place which never moves farther away.

The saints teach us that the inner road is paved with Shabd. Shabd is energy that sustains the creation and, more important, is the manifestation of God within.

Yet we are running in circles, trapped by the gravitational pull of the mind. In addition, we are burdened by our past karma, and, through improper actions, we perpetually add to our karmic load. If we do not account for those karmas, we are subject to reincarnation

But not to worry. When one meets a saint, a living Master, a God-realized being, he boots us out of the orbit of our mind, gives us the tools with which to overcome the laws of karma and reincarnation, and provides the fuel that propels us higher. When we practice the path of Surat Shabd Yoga, we cease traveling horizontally through life and instead travel within.

The saints teach us to stop doing the things that bind us to the world and start doing the things that free us. This is, simply put, the four vows we take at the time we are initiated by a saint. We agree to become vegetarian, to abstain from alcohol and drugs, and to live a moral and ethical life. With the fourth vow, we agree to meditate for two-and-a-half hours each day. Eliminate the horizontal and do the vertical. Abstain from bad actions and embrace the good action: meditation.

In this practice of meditation, we travel on the inner road step by step with each repetition of the five holy names and with each moment that we spend listening for and eventually to the Shabd – also known as the audible life stream, Word, or Logos.

As mentioned, the saints give us the tools to overcome our karmic load. As we watch and listen to videos of Baba Ji's answers to our questions, we again and again hear the plea to release us from lifetimes of past karmas. The answer always seems to be that this can be done only through our simran and bhajan, which requires us to put in our promised time each day. As Hazur said to a questioner:

Since all types of karmas have to be cleared before you can escape from this realm of Kal, and destiny you cannot change, the saints advise that if you meditate and live according to the principles of the spiritual path, your willpower becomes very strong and you are not affected by those fate karmas.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

It sounds so easy – quit running around chasing after the mirage of happiness across the road and instead sit in meditation, ascend the inner road, and reach unconditional happiness.

Do we put in our full time? Do we focus on our simran or do we chase one thought after another? Have we given our priority to so many things that we do not have time for meditation? Are we still falling victim to the five plagues – lust, anger, greed, attachment, and pride?

According to Sultan Bahu:

Only the mind that works in harmony with my spirit is my friend.

*Only the person who has so tamed his mind
can realize the Name of God.*

*This same mind forces the abstinent and the devout
to grovel before greed and temptation.*

*Tough is the path to God, O Bahu,
it is not a bowl of your mother's pudding*

Beset by the maladies of the mind, we tell ourselves, “First I have to overcome my bad thoughts, control my desires – then I can meditate.” Indeed, one of the biggest mistakes we make is thinking that we can overcome our bad actions and desires with our willpower, and, once done, then we can meditate. No, no, no. It is meditation that releases us from our bad actions. It is only meditation that can tame the mind, not the other way around. The more we meditate, the more our worldly desires dissipate.

Hazur responded to a question in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

Instead of worrying about eliminating that thought, attach yourself to the sound within and you will automatically rise above the thought. It's very difficult to eliminate thoughts one by one. It's impossible. But when we attach ourselves to the Shabd and Nam within, all these thoughts are automatically eliminated. Instead of cursing the darkness, we should light a candle.

So, little chickens, quit crossing the road; there is no other side. Practice your meditation. The road is within.



God's in the Details

The saints tell us that to be given the human form is a blessing, and to be initiated by a true Master is an even greater blessing, for only then can we learn the meditation practice that will take us back to our Creator. In earlier days, however, disciples often had to pass through various preliminary tests before they were granted initiation. The sixteenth-century Indian saint Eknath was one such disciple.

Eknath sought spiritual enlightenment from his teacher, Janardan. Being humble of spirit, Eknath never asked for initiation, nor did his teacher offer it. Eknath was content just to be in the company of a sage. He was, therefore, eager to engage in what some would call menial tasks. He cooked meals for his guru, cleaned his home, and washed his clothes.

During the time Eknath performed these duties, he watched other young men seeking to become disciples come and go. After several days of chopping vegetables, these individuals saw the work they were doing as pointless. They had come to the guru to receive the sacred teachings and attain spiritual liberation. Commonplace tasks such as the ones they were assigned seemed to have little to do with the loftier goals to which they aspired. Eknath, on the other hand, remained steadfast, performing whatever Janardan asked him to do.

One day, Janardan told Eknath that the key to success in one's search for God was a concentrated mind. He told Eknath that if a disciple found it difficult to focus on small tasks, the aspirant would find it even more daunting to focus the mind during meditation.

Eventually Janardan decided to give Eknath greater responsibilities and asked him to keep track of the king's accounts, reconciling them every evening. Tallying the entries was a meticulous task requiring great patience.

One evening, as Eknath was busy with his work, he discovered a discrepancy of one rupee in his calculations. Again and again, he retraced his steps only to encounter the same error. Determined to maintain complete accuracy, he worked through the night. Before he knew it, morning arrived. Much to his elation, he had finally found the mistake in his calculations and was able to balance the accounts. Meanwhile,

Janardan appeared and heard Eknath's story. Eknath had been rechecking his calculations for twelve hours before he found the missing rupee.

Janardan was extremely pleased to discover the effort and meticulous attention to detail that Eknath had shown. Janardan then commented that Eknath would make a good disciple. Eknath was surprised by his teacher's remarks; after all, he had only been reconciling account books.

Janardan then explained that one's character is revealed in how one performs even the smallest tasks. The patience and singlemindedness with which one does such work indicate similar attention to detail in greater endeavours. As a result of Eknath's work, Janardan found him fit for initiation. He told Eknath: "If you meditate with the same intensity with which you kept your mind on this ledger, you will quickly reach God."

This story illustrates that the diligence and care with which we tackle our daily tasks, no matter how mundane, can help strengthen the focus and determination we need to do our meditation. Anyone who has tried to meditate knows that concentration and perseverance are required to rein in the mind. Refocusing the mind to the task at hand, whether in our worldly work or during our spiritual practice, allows us to persist till we reach our goal.

The story also shows how humility and surrender to the will of the Master are essential for any disciple. If we can patiently chop vegetables simply because our Master has asked us to, we can train our mind to put aside its desires and instead follow the path our Master has set out for us.

Story adapted from *Wisdom's Blossoms: Tales of the Saints of India*



The Mystery and the Miracle

“I’m on a boat sailing to some island where I don’t know anybody. A boat someone is operating, and we aren’t in touch.” With those words, an American television writer in the early stages of dementia introduces his memoir, *Life’s Work*.

Our situation on the path is much the same. We’re on a boat – our spiritual teachings – that is taking us to a destination most of us may have read about but do not understand. That destination, that island, is a state of consciousness – call it awakening, enlightenment, a merging with the divine. We’ve read so much about it in our books and heard about it in satsang, but many of us, most of the time, don’t really know where we’re going. Our soul knows, because it remembers its true home, but our minds have no memory of our true self.

We’re taking Sant Mat on faith. We’re choosing to believe what the saints tell us – that the Master is guiding us, on the outside and the inside. We’re told that someone or something – the Master, God, the Shabd – is operating our boat, though we may not be in conscious contact with that power. Like the TV writer, we’re not in touch with it. We may feel that some power is directing our lives, and we can look back and see a guiding current, like a tide, pushing us one way or another. We have faith, however slight it may seem, that we’re headed in the right direction, that our soul is a particle of the divine. And we want to experience the bliss and the love that saints tell us is our birthright. We can even sense that divine love sometimes – delicate yet overpowering – the way we catch the scent of roses as we walk by a neighbour’s garden on a summer night.

But no matter how many of the Masters’ answers to our questions we’ve heard, no matter how many books we’ve read, how many Dera sessions we’ve attended, or how much seva we’ve done, we’re ignorant of the power operating our little boat until we experience it directly for ourselves – until we come in conscious contact with the creative power of the Shabd.

Until we awaken from this dream we call life, we’re just telling ourselves a story. Until we experience the truth of the path for ourselves it will remain a story – a lovely fairytale.

Mystics and masters come to teach us how to make the teachings more than a story: how to climb out of our ignorance and realize that we are one with God.

In the meantime, we're in that metaphorical boat, sailing to a metaphorical island. We know we're moving, that something is powering our boat, but we're not yet in touch with it. We're in flux. About this state, the writer said in an interview with *The New York Times*: "When you're in transition, there's a sense that life lives you. You're holding on and trying to accommodate all the impositions and uncertainties."

This is certainly true for us. We don't feel in control; we may feel that we are walking around in a dream or in a play, and we are just playing a part. Our plans don't work out, we feel dissatisfied, and we struggle to accommodate life's impositions and uncertainties.

It's no wonder. Maharaj Charan Singh tells us in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I, that the Lord "is doing everything." He explains:

We're all puppets, and our greatest realization is that we are puppets.... By meditation we learn that we are puppets, that we are helpless. The ego goes, and we begin to learn that whatever is being done is being done by him.

The trick for us is to let go and let God, as the saying goes. We need to get over our fear of not being in control. That fear can paralyze us and prevent us from thinking clearly. The saints tell us that this feeling of not being in control is nothing to be frightened about.

In the book *Learning to Fall*, the author reminds us that to know God is to enter in the "cloud of unknowing," a term coined by an anonymous medieval mystic. The author writes:

Life is not a problem, but a mystery.... Problems are to be solved; true mysteries are not.... And what does mystery ask of us? Only that we be in its presence, that we fully, consciously, hand ourselves over.... We can participate in mystery only by letting go of solutions.

This is what we do when we sit down to meditate. We hand ourselves over to a higher power and let go of trying to figure anything out. We need to trust the mystery of all that we do not know until we finally let go of our minds and realize the truth for ourselves.

While it may seem impossible, we don't have to worry about that – the Master will get it done. It will happen not through magic but through the alchemy of our effort and his grace. This gets back to the idea of life living us. We are going through our destiny – reaping the seeds we've sown, paying down our karmic debt. But the Master is doling out that karma; he's in control of it. As Hazur explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I: “Master has placed himself in the disciple when he initiates him, and he becomes responsible for taking the soul back to the Father. He has to account to Kal whatever is due to Kal, and then take the soul out of that.”

Our meditation is the currency that the Masters use to help us pay off our karmas and ultimately rise above them – accommodating the impositions and uncertainties of life along the way. Hazur tells us that with meditation, our willpower becomes strong and gives us resilience, allowing us to go through our destiny with minimal fuss. With our effort comes his grace.

The role of the Master is crucial. Hazur explains:

There are so many karmas which are keeping us in this world. Many karmas are cleared in the company of a mystic because we are influenced by the aura or by the company of that saint. That company, the association with that saint creates such a deep impression on our heart and mind that ultimately we come back to that saint. So naturally all karmas are washed, when, with the help of a saint, we start following the path.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

It is we who must start following the path. And when we do, he says, “we are at once detached from the world. Now it's only a question of karmic adjustment. But our permanent relation with the world ceases to exist when we come to the path.”

Hazur's words bring us to one more observation from our television writer. He described his present relationship to life with dementia this way: “I'm estranged. I can kid myself, but I ain't a regular.”

We're estranged from the world now, too – we ain't regulars. We're not better than anyone else; we're just different, because we want to go home. We're facing the impositions and uncertainties of life, supported by the Master and our meditation. But we're headed out – we've left the shore.

That is why we often feel so estranged. We begin to lose interest in the people, places, and things that used to capture our attention. We may try to hold on to them for something to do – some distraction or pleasure – but their hold on us is weakening, till sometimes we feel as if we're just going through the motions, as if life is living us rather than the other way around.

In this story of our lives that is Sant Mat, we have every opportunity to “accentuate the positive,” as the old song goes, or, in more modern language, “control the narrative.” We have to take a positive approach. Hazur said: “We have to light our own candle and not worry about the darkness. Why curse the darkness? Light your own candle. We have to light our own candle within rather than be frightened of the darkness unnecessarily.” We light our own candle by following the Master’s instructions to meditate and live a moral life.

Baba Ji keeps telling us to stop analyzing and calculating. And Hazur told someone:

Whether you concentrate or not is immaterial, but you definitely should sit in meditation because we have to pass through so many phases before we are able to concentrate and enjoy that pull within, its bliss and peace within.... Every phase is important for our spiritual development. So, we have to continue.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II

There’s no looking back. We’re in our boat, our little ship of Nam, and we’ve been pushed away from the shore. We can be confident that despite whatever fog and turbulence we encounter, we are being looked after. We can’t know the future; we can know only the moment we’re in, only our own experience.

Our experience is the process of unraveling the mystery of life and bearing witness to the spiritual miracle the mystics perform. As Hazur explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III, this miracle is “to change our very attitude of life, to detach us from this creation and attach us to the Creator.... We are awakened from deep slumber by the mystics – that is the miracle they perform.... And this miracle is individual with every disciple. He feels that miracle within himself.” In fact, Hazur reminds us: “At every step in a disciple’s life, there is a miracle.”



The Colors of This Life

It is estimated that the human eye can see about a million colors. What abundance! We live in an alluring world where we can easily lose ourselves through what our senses perceive. And with this perception, our mind experiences a multitude of emotions, almost as countless as the varied colors of the creation.

In the arc of a lifespan, we live through moments of wonder and joy as we encounter the birth of our child or drink in a sky full of stars. We also experience suffering and chaos, as when a loved one dies or we struggle with ill health. We feel both the warmth of the sun and the cold of icy winds; bright days of contentment and empty, dark nights of the soul. These varied “colors” of emotions, thoughts, and experiences make up our life.

Entranced by the kaleidoscope of this world, we hurl ourselves toward everything that brings us pleasure while doing our utmost to avoid any pain. As we grow, we learn to play our roles and blend in with society and do what our culture asks of us. But along the way, we begin to feel a lack, an emptiness, a persistent craving that nothing, no matter how beautiful or pleasurable, can satisfy.

Fortunately, our Master comes to collect us, and he shows us the way to peace. He points toward an unchanging and everlasting truth that far exceeds the multicolored illusions of this world. He tells us that this physical reality is a mirage, a dim reflection of a more expansive truth beyond our physical perceptions.

Mystics of all ages see through the veil of mind and maya and reveal to seekers the true essence of this physical phenomena we find ourselves in. For example, in the book *A Thousand Names for Joy*, the author interprets the ancient Tao Te Ching according to her own spiritual experiences. She refers to the Master, as Lao-tzu did in the Tao, as someone with a peaceful mind, believing that we can all awaken and “know the difference between reality and our thoughts about reality.” She writes: “The Master observes the colors of the world, its sounds, flavors, and thoughts. Since they are all reflections of the mind and . . . realization of that is precise and indisputable, [the Master] is never fooled.”

The Sant Mat Masters teach that the Shabd, Nam, or Word of God is the creative power that sustains every part of the universe. Shabd holds us in love and grace, and it is the purpose of every human being to come in touch with it, know it, and merge with it. We meditate on this holy Word – we practice listening to it – so that we can become familiar with this essence that underlies “the colors of the world” and that is at the core of who we truly are.

Once we come in contact with the Master and focus on the teachings of the saints, this multicolored world begins to lose the fascination and luster it once held for us. The Master promises us that with a sincere heart and disciplined one-pointedness, we can reach a place of bliss and peace and come to know him in his radiant form. This is not some far off place we hope to reach one day; it is a state of being always accessible to us and the very source of our seeking.

As we come to notice all the colors of our life – the duality of despair and hope, clarity and confusion – we find that the Master has always been at the centre. His love is unconditional, and we realize this by remembering him with simran, in times of joy, challenge, and everything in between. In truth, it is he who turns us toward him and helps us to let go of the world.

The Sanskrit word vairagya, directly translated, means loss of color, and in Eastern and yogic philosophy refers to dispassion, detachment, and renunciation. All spiritual traditions hold this common precept – that in seeking God, we must necessarily turn away from the illusions of the world. This detachment is not so much living an isolated, ascetic lifestyle but rather one in which we do not hold the world so tightly. It is through the spiritual practice of daily meditation; abstinence from animal flesh, alcohol, and other mind-altering substances; and living according to the highest moral standards that we begin this journey of letting go into God.

In *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. 1, Maharaj Charan Singh describes the ultimate fruit of true discipleship:

Living constantly in his presence, [such devotees] have become one with him. All the veils that hid God from their sight have been torn away and their chains broken. They are completely free and are enraptured to see his radiant light. They are completely dyed in the color of their master.

As we walk this path, we start to notice all the chains that bind us to this physical realm, those of the body, mind, our relations, and various attachments. With the Master's grace and our effort, we begin to experience a natural turning inward, as if our gaze and focus is being redirected. We begin to feel lighter in our dealings with the world, and we find that we are more forgiving and more able to accept the conditions of our life. And so, we begin to walk with our Master right beside us, through the many shades and colors of our life. We come to trust his plan for us and become more accepting of our life as it unfolds. We find ourselves having more faith in his love, and we bow our heads in gratitude.

Without our even knowing it, our Master dyes us in the color of his love. We inevitably go through the circumstances of our karma, but our lives now are imbued with his grace. We ask him to love us, not knowing that it is with his love that we survive each moment; we beg for his grace, not knowing that every pore of our being is already steeped in it. We ask him for himself, not knowing that he has always been a part of us.

With our childish, limited vision, we are unable to see the inspired picture of our life that he has painted. In his hands, our ordinary life has become a priceless masterpiece.



The First Time I Saw His Face

The following excerpt from With a Great Master in India describes an American initiate's first impression of his Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh, upon visiting the Dera for the first time, in 1932.

Truly, as his secretary wrote several years ago, he is to be seen and not described. Since seeing him I can think of nothing else. His image lingers before me all the while. I have never seen such a face before, nor imagined there was one like it among the sons of men. If ever there was a face combining old age (he is now seventy-four years of age) with beauty, majesty and calm power, it is his. But beyond all of that there is a sort of spiritual radiance which no words can describe, but which gives one a feeling of deep peace, as if the discords of earth were no longer possible in his presence.

As you look into his face you lose all desire to talk, even ask questions. You simply absorb the light. His voice is vibrant with love and his smile seems as if it lights up the room. He is as simple in manner as a little child, with no sort of pose or air about him. He always appears as if he regretted being the center of an adoring crowd. His spirit of good fellowship is enchanting. You soon feel at home with him and not only that, but you come to feel that there is no real home except in his presence. Thus he makes you a part of his own family at once. His manner toward all of us is like that of a mother comforting her tired children and soothing them to rest. His manifest love is his supreme quality, as it appears to me, and that is also the very essence of his gospel.



Baggage Handling

Elevators, escalators, and wheeled suitcases. What do these three have in common? They make it easy for us to manage our baggage in airports with minimum effort, especially when traveling alone. Of course, once we reach our destination and exit the airport with our multiple bags, it's a different story. Sooner or later, we will most likely have to climb up a flight of stairs – from the platform of a train or subway station to the street, from the street to a hotel and sometimes even up to our room on a higher floor. Even the young and fit among us may be challenged, what to say of the elderly and infirm. Unless there is help at hand – a willing passerby or a porter whose profession it is to carry luggage from A to B, sometimes on their heads – how can we go up unaided?

Isn't this question just as valid for our spiritual journey as it is for our worldwide travels? How can we go up unaided when we are carrying a heavy load of worries, cares, attachments, and desires? For this journey, we need to let go of everything that is weighing us down and holding us back and ask the Master for help.

When taking a trip, according to experts in traveling light, we must ruthlessly reduce the contents of our bags to the bare minimum; what we cannot carry, we can buy when we get to our destination, the experts tell us.

How do we travel light on our spiritual journey? What do we need to take with us? Nothing. What will we need when we arrive at our destination? Nothing. The Bible tells us, "For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we can carry nothing out."

So, what do we need to ruthlessly discard? Everything – all the things that disturb and fill our minds when we sit down to meditate.

How do we discard our thoughts, not only during meditation but throughout the day? How do we stop worrying about our families, our finances, our health, and agonizing over every little decision? We need help from someone who can take our burden from us. On this inner path we need to seek the help of the Master and then let go of our mental and emotional baggage.

Why is it so difficult for many of us to ask for help? From a young age, we have been taught to stand on our own feet. Such independence is a

good thing. But taken to extremes, the toddler who pushes his mother's hands aside as she ties his shoelaces, saying proudly "me do it," can trip over his loose laces and hurt himself; the lone traveler who states firmly "I can manage" has to climb up and down stairs multiple times, ferrying each piece of baggage one at a time. And the initiate sitting in meditation may waste decades worrying about worldly problems instead of relaxing, focusing, and realizing his or her real identity.

At some point, at the foot of the stairs or at the end of a scattered meditation period, we may realize that we cannot do it all by ourselves. There is strength in admitting our helplessness and surrendering to the inevitable: we need help.

The truth is that we are not alone, and we never have been. Maharaj Charan Singh comforts us: "Your master is always within you. He is not anywhere outside at all... We are never alone – our master is always with us," he tells us in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III.

The Master is with us on our travels, outside and in, 24/7. He is there when we are worrying about how we will get our luggage out of the overhead bin on the plane (a fellow passenger lifts it down), how we will manage the stairs to the tarmac when we arrive (a flight attendant grabs our bag). He is there when we are dealing with issues in our families and communities and when we are sitting in meditation lost in the coming day's affairs. He is constantly whispering:

Your worries and cares are Master's worries and cares. Leave them to him to deal with. Having become carefree, your business is to cultivate his love.

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Spiritual Gems*

How do we get to the place where we truly believe that we can safely let go and everything will be taken care of by him? Faith and effort.

Faith comes from realizing how many gifts he has already given us: a human birth, initiation, yearning. He has given us access to his physical form through weekly question-and-answer sessions online, Zoom calls to our sangats, and personal visits to some of our centres. He is continually showing us how far he is willing to go to support us on our path; so surely, we can safely let go and let him handle our baggage.

Effort comes from our daily meditation, which will take us to our inner Master and the true faith that leads to surrender.

Hazur further explains in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III:

When your mind is attached to the shabd and nam within, then you don't think about the past or worry about the future.... When you positively put your mind in touch with the light and sound within, automatically you cease worrying. You get that bliss and happiness within yourself.

Meditation, as always, is the solution. When we go within and experience the Shabd form of the Master, we will be enveloped in his loving kindness and there will be no more doubts. True faith will be ours. This, then, is how we let go; this is how we put down our burdens and travel carefree – inside and out.

In *Legacy of Love* Hazur said: “With nothing in our pocket and the Father with us – this is the best grace we can have from the Father.”



What is the use of knowing our weakness if we do not implore God to sustain us with His power? What is the value of recognizing our poverty if we never use it to entreat His mercy?... The value of our weakness and of poverty is that they are the earth in which God sows the seed of desire. And no matter how abandoned we may seem to be, the confident desire to love Him in spite of our abject misery is the sign of His presence and the pledge of our salvation.

Thoughts in Solitude



Facing the Void

It seems as if we are always running after something, chasing a mirage, an illusion of what we think will make us happy. But we're a bit like stray street animals chasing cars; when they catch one, they don't know what to do with it.

We're also running away as much as we're running toward our illusions and desires. Perhaps we are running away from pausing or slowing down our lives. We are trying to avoid the void – the emptiness we feel when we face the stillness within.

We incessantly try to fill our lives with every imaginable possession and emotion and with constant doing, grasping, and achieving. But deep down – if we only realized it – we just want to relax, rest, and be satisfied. We want to have the faith and strength to let go, the way a baby rests in his mother's lap, completely content.

Why do we avoid the pause, the void? Perhaps because we think that if we stop running, if we pause, we will cease to exist. The mind is constantly engaged, whether with emotions, sensations, perceptions, or with the accumulation of knowledge, possessions, and relationships. It is always so very busy. It tries to make sense of everything it does not accept until it has exhausted itself in analyzing, conceptualizing and categorizing. This is the nature of the mind – never at rest, always in motion.

Guru Amar Das explains to us in the *Adi Granth*: “O Mind, your real form is that Divine light. Realize your true form.” Saints tell us that the mind can realize its true form only by embracing stillness, by willingly and boldly facing the void and becoming the void. If the mind will, just for a moment, have the courage to listen to the soul's call to pause and rest, it will realize the mysteries that the void encompasses. Then the mind will experience the divinity Guru Amar Das describes. It will be able to experience the vast ocean of love that is beyond its fears, concepts, and analysis. It will drop away, allowing the soul to at last reunite with its divine source.

Our meditation is nothing but giving the mind reassurance and strength to face the void, to cease its wandering. With meditation, we build pauses into our thoughts, and with practice we can extend those pauses. It is during the pauses that true knowledge, true realization, and real learning take place. That is when our real nature is revealed to us.

When we still our minds in meditation, our dormant faculties of inner sight and inner hearing awaken. Enveloped in this so-called void, we sense the outstretched hand of our true companion, our Master. Beyond our concepts and illusions, we are able to realize that he has been with us all along, guiding, protecting, and nurturing us, always giving us the true love that our mind has been longing for.

Eventually we discover that what we thought was a void is actually full of love, light, and the presence of our Master. It is where we can bask in the company of our true companion and realize our true self. This is why the Masters have always emphasized the importance of meditation. It is only with meditation that we can create that pause in our thought process that will allow the shining light of love to seep into our consciousness and transform us. Soami Ji reassures us in *Sar Bachan Poetry*:

Why are you confused and disheartened, dear soul!

Take it from me

the Master will ferry you across the ocean.

Kal cannot touch you

if you hold tight to the banner of Shabd.

You should become enthralled with Shabd

and refuse to be swayed.

Ignore all misleading talk –

acknowledge the path of the Master as true.

Rise up and establish yourself in the realm of Agam,

as Radha Soami has explained to you.

The pandemic, social distancing, and lockdown gave us the perfect opportunity to cease all our outward activities, reset our priorities, and devote time to our real task. It is as if nature forced us to pay attention to our Master's teachings and act on them. Like a bulldozer pulling us along with it to the right path, our Master uses every opportunity to draw our attention toward him.

It is only through our meditation that we can develop that patience, endurance, and faith to boldly face the stillness within. As our fear and illusions fall away, the soul becomes pure and light in what we once called a void. The soul then leaves the company of the mind and becomes the light itself.



You Got This!

Encouragement helps everyone shine. Sometimes, when parents, teachers, coaches, or friends want to give an extra bit of support and confidence to a child about to attempt a challenging act – kicking a ball, jumping from the high dive, giving a performance in front of an audience – they say, with enthusiasm: “You got this!” These simple words from a trustworthy person may be just the boost of belief that a child needs to let go of shyness or fear that might otherwise get in the way of kicking that ball into the goal or jumping in the water from higher than ever before or giving a performance that receives a standing ovation.

Like children, we also feel more confident when someone we trust has faith in our ability to succeed at something we want to achieve.

As initiates of a true Master, we want to achieve perfect concentration at the eye centre and experience the presence of his radiant Shabd form. And this is something the Master assures us that we can do. When we were initiated, we were not only given instructions for how to achieve this – our human purpose – but we also were told that our goal is already within us. Since our true being is soul, which is of the same essence as the Lord, it is also one with Shabd: the power that created and sustains the entire universe. That Shabd, which is within everyone, can be found as sound infused with light, a ringing radiance behind and between the two eyes. When we meditate, we are gradually weaning our mind away from the sense pleasures of the outer, everyday world and bringing it toward the inner world of spirituality.

It's simple: we take our mind's attention from the outside and bring it within, every day for two-and-a-half hours – day after day, month after month, year after year. Then, one day the mind stops resisting and starts to enjoy the peace and bliss within.

As the consciousness rises, the soul, which has been entangled with the mind for eons, begins to free itself and rise even higher toward its true home, until it reunites with the Shabd in Sach Khand. What a journey! And yet we aren't really going anywhere because it's all already inside of us – we just have to become aware and experience it for ourselves.

Even though we struggle, the Master has our backs and cheers us on. He's always telling us, in one way or another, "You got this!"

Why does it seem so difficult, if not impossible, to achieve? The answer, of course, is the mind. In from *self to Shabd*, the author calls it "an amazing device" and describes what it can do:

The mind has the ability to rewind, go forward, play, and pause.... [It] does not need any physical buttons to access the past, present, future, or pause functions. This is done automatically, simply by placing our attention wherever we desire.

We can imagine the future, remember the past, or be in the present, wherever we place our thoughts. But unfortunately, we have little control over the mind. Our thoughts take us where we think we can find happiness. But no matter where we find contentment, it's short-lived and soon turns into feelings of frustration, anxiety, and fear, taking us on a roller coaster of emotions, away from the peace of mind that we seek. Worst of all, we can't figure out how to stop our thoughts and "put the mind in pause mode," this author writes.

This outward mind loves running after the senses and focusing on thinking, judging, and labeling the human experience. It desires all types and forms of variety and wants to be entertained. "By keeping our attention in the world, the outward mind has created the illusion that we are separate and alone," the author of from *self to Shabd* writes. We believe that we are our mind and body, and we isolate ourselves from others with an individual personality and ego. This illusion makes us fear the ups and downs of life and causes us to forget that the power of the Shabd is right within us.

That's why we need encouragement – to kick away thoughts and worries, to jump into stillness, to forget about the audience of our mind and focus on simran and the inner sound. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II, Maharaj Charan Singh tells us:

We should try to face our day-to-day problems by remembering our destination, remembering the path. Our problems are of our own making.... We have sown the seeds and we are here now to face the results of those seeds. ...

If you meditate, you build an atmosphere around you, an atmosphere of bliss, happiness, and contentment. And then you can pass through all these ups and downs without losing your balance.

The Master also assures us that he is always with us and always helping us: “His guiding hand is always there, whether we are conscious of it or not,” Hazur writes in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II. Believing this can give us the confidence that Baba Ji expects when he tells us that we have to make the effort to do our meditation. It’s the only way to tame the mind. We can’t expect him to do it for us, just as we can’t expect him to chew our food for us. Yes, the Shabd is already within us, but we have to work to realize it before we can have that experience for ourselves.

Conquering the mind and gaining spiritual maturity is not something we can do by ourselves, but we must do our part. The saints assure us that we can do it. In *Quest for Light* Hazur encourages us: “If we go on doing our best, success will definitely come one day.” And Baba Jaimal Singh reminds us in *Spiritual Letters*:

You reached Sach Khand the very day you were initiated – that is the place for which you are destined. Who can take away the gift bestowed by the Satguru? Because the karmic account of worldly give-and-take is still to be finished, he cannot take you there. Once it is fully settled, he will take you there at once.

If this is the Lord’s will, it can only be the mind that makes us doubt that we can achieve our spiritual goal. We know what to do. Hazur makes it so clear. In *Quest for Light* he writes: “Do your duty with love and devotion and leave the rest to the Master. No effort is ever in vain.”

No problem, right? We got this!



Take Time to Be with Him

In one of his essays, the American naturalist Henry David Thoreau describes the many different colors of nature as the seasons change from late summer to autumn to winter. He emphasizes that we will see the beauty of nature only if we actively look for it and are prepared to see it. He writes:

All this you surely will see, and much more, if you are prepared to see it, – if you look for it.... Objects are concealed from our view not so much because they are out of the course of our visual ray as because we do not bring our minds and eyes to bear on them.... The greater part of the phenomena of Nature are for this reason concealed from us all our lives.... Nature does not cast pearls before swine. There is just as much beauty visible to us in the landscape as we are prepared to appreciate, – not a grain more.... We cannot see anything until we are possessed with the idea of it, take it into our heads – and then we can hardly see anything else.... A man sees only what concerns him.

In the same way, saints and mystics throughout history have told us that we can only become aware of God when we deliberately look for him and focus our attention on him – when we are consumed with the idea of him and are prepared to appreciate and value his presence in our lives. And once we do become aware of his presence, we will hardly see anything else in this creation. Then, wherever we look, we will see him.

The mystics remind us that God is always with us. His love is all around us, his grace is always flowing, but we don't feel his love or benefit from his grace. We keep ourselves so busy that we have no time left for God.

They explain that we are dividing our attention among too many different things, as we become endlessly caught up in a thousand and one distractions. Many of us spend hours each day on the Internet and social media, reading information that is irrelevant and maybe even harmful to the quality of our lives. Hardly a moment goes by without us checking the latest breaking news alerts or comments on our Facebook status and emails that ding at us from our mobile phones. We can barely tolerate

sitting quietly in a room by ourselves; we've lost our ability to be still, relaxed, and focused.

Basically, our lives have become scattered, reactive, and confused. We are like ships lost at sea in this creation, unsure of where we are going and wandering around in circles.

Shams-e Tabrizi describes our confused state:

You have divided your being into a hundred thousand pieces; each piece is thrown in one direction and finds a dead end. If you do not unify your fragmented self and do not use these pieces to buy His union, you will end up losing your life without ever having discovered your own mystery.

Quoted in *The Guru of Rumi: The Teachings of Shams Tabrizi*

Baba Ji has said that there is a direct relationship between our ability to hold our attention still and our ability to be aware of God's presence in our lives. He often says that it's all a matter of becoming receptive to and aware of what is already there. That's what we do through our daily practice of meditation: learn to become still, aware, and receptive. Meditation is the means through which we unify our fragmented selves and turn our attention fully and intentionally toward God every day – even every moment. “Don't let a moment pass, says Sena, without remembering and repeating the Name of the Supreme Being,” we read in *Many Voices, One Song*.

In one of his poems, Rabindranath Tagore writes about taking time during our busy days to pause and to sit face to face with God. In *Gitanjali*, he writes:

*I ask for a moment's indulgence to sit by thy side.
The works that I have in hand I will finish afterwards.
Away from the sight of thy face my heart knows no rest nor respite,
and my work becomes an endless toil in a shoreless sea of toil.
Today the summer has come to my window with its sighs
and murmurs; and the bees are plying their minstrelsy
at the court of the flowering grove.
Now it is time to sit quiet, face to face with thee,
and to sing dedication of life in this silent and overflowing leisure.*

Over the years Baba Ji has encouraged us to slow down and take time out of our chaotic lives to be still and to reflect, to remember why we are here, to remember God. He has occasionally quoted lines from the poem “Leisure”:

*What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
And stare as long as sheep or cows.
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.
No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.
No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance.
No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began.
A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.*

We miss so much by keeping ourselves overly busy and distracted. What if we were given a chance to pause from the busyness of our lives? The saints assure us that there is something positive in every situation if we are willing to see it. Maybe the pandemic gave us an opportunity to slow down, reflect, and reassess. It reminded us of how we want to spend our precious time. Maybe now we finally have “time to stand and stare” – and be with him.



Trusting the Master

Saints come into this world to pull their marked sheep back home to the Lord. They tell us that this world is not our true home and give us the strength and inspiration to realize our real home within.

We can take nothing with us when we die. Everything will be left behind. The evidence is all around us, yet we easily fool ourselves as we are swept along by our karmas, attachments, and desires, along with the relentless pull of the world. To guide us home, a living Master is sent to reveal the way. Summarizing a satsang by Maharaj Jagat Singh, the author of *With the Three Masters*, Vol. III, tells us: “You should prepare for the journey after death, which is the real purpose of human life. God lives in your body and beckons you from within, but your attention is turned outward and you do not hear him.”

The Masters implore their disciples to devote themselves to this journey by making time for our spiritual practice through meditation. The Lord continually reassures us within that we can face anything in this life. That reassurance enables us to trust, defined as “a firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability or strength of someone or something.” Trust expresses our confidence in the Master, in both his teachings and his love for us. We can best demonstrate our trust by following the tenets laid out by the Masters, with faith and unwavering determination. In Maharaj Charan Singh’s first satsang, he said that we “should try to follow with confidence and firmness the path of Surat Shabd Yoga.”

The saints tell us that within everyone is a “ringing radiance” – what the Sant Mat masters call the Shabd – a creative power that is hidden in all forms of life. That power is love, which invites us to experience within ourselves what is true, real, and unchanging. Maharaj Jagat Singh referred to this power as “the call of God inside the human body.”

The Master assures us that long before most of us have experienced the Shabd, we are being protected, cared for, and looked after. Maharaj Sawan Singh wrote in *Philosophy of the Master*, Vol. V: “The Masters ... look after their disciples whether they be near at hand or far away.”

We assume that we know what the word “near” means, but when a Master says that he is near to every initiate, he is describing a mysterious

and profound link. It is a link that begins, really, from birth. Maharaj Charan Singh confirms this when he says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol III:

Well, brother, to be very frank ... actually, master takes charge [of us] right from birth.... But we become conscious that we are being taken care of only when we see the master within – then we know that we are being helped, we are being taken care of. Before that, we are not conscious of it.

If this nearness is hard to fathom, it is an even greater challenge to comprehend that every initiate is dear to the Master. “Every initiate” includes those of us who struggle, who are distracted and unfocused, who are forgetful and unappreciative. Included would be the whiners, the complainers, the skeptics, the impatient, and the undisciplined. Especially included would be those of us who struggle with meditation and who believe that we lack faith, hope, and gratitude. Even so, as hard as this might be for us to comprehend, we are all precious and dear to the Master. This relationship with the Master is a holy bond. It is our most significant and primary relationship. Every initiate is a beloved child of the Master.

Yet, every relationship requires time and attention to flourish. We nurture our relationship with the Master through meditation. Meditation is the best way to please him while growing our love and devotion for him. Hazur revealed how best to fulfill the longing to be close to the Master when he told us, in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III: “Whenever you are attending to the master within, you are showing your presence to him physically, within. The master is within you. So be in his presence; you are physically present before him.”

Saints tell us that the entire path of Sant Mat could be reduced to one word: meditation. The answer to every question is meditation. The solution to every problem is meditation. Bringing our attention to the eye centre through meditation is the struggle to replace the scattered and unfocused thoughts of the world through the unbroken repetition of simran. It is the struggle to turn away from worldly attachments and desires; to reverse the downward and outward flow of our energy and attention; and to conquer our ego so we may turn our face toward the Master. By meditating on his name, by attending to the Master within, we are drawn into his divine presence.



BOOK REVIEW

Focus: The Hidden Driver of Excellence

BY DANIEL GOLEMAN

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Ram Dass, an American spiritual teacher, famously advised, “Be here now,” meaning to focus our attention on the moment. The subject of this book by Daniel Goleman is focus itself – about how to be intentional about our mental focus and about the advantages that focus gives us in our thinking, activities, and relationships.

Intentional focused attention is valued in all spheres of activity. The author D.H. Lawrence wrote,

If you live by the cosmos, you look in the cosmos for your clue. If you live by a personal god, you pray to him. If you are rational, you think things over. But it all amounts to the same thing in the end. Prayer, or thought, or studying the stars, or watching the flight of birds, or studying the entrails of the sacrifice, it is all the same process, ultimately: of divination. All it depends on is the amount of true, sincere, religious concentration you can bring to bear on your object. An act of pure attention, if you are capable of it, will bring its own answer. And you choose that object to concentrate upon which will best focus your consciousness. Every real discovery made, every serious and significant decision ever reached, was reached and made by divination. The soul stirs, and makes an act of pure attention, and that is a discovery.

The book is organized into two major sections. Endnotes provide citations to relevant scientific research and further explain the ideas presented.

The first section is devoted to understanding the nature of focus, attention, and self-awareness. It delves into the psychology of a focused mind, showing ways in which focus is expressed in everyday life in different circumstances. The author writes, “While the link between attention and excellence remains hidden most of the time, it ripples through almost everything we seek to accomplish.”

Goleman cites studies in cognitive science on various elements of attention, ranging from “concentration” (the ability to focus the attention

narrowly on a single idea, topic, or object), to “open awareness” (the ability to take notice of what’s going on without getting caught up in specific details, censoring, or making judgments), and to “selective attention” (the ability of the attention to shut out many sensory inputs as irrelevant and bring to conscious awareness only selected information). Studies show how these elements affect our ability to accomplish tasks despite sensory and emotional distractions. Interestingly, Goleman cites studies in cognitive science showing how focus affects not only issues of comprehension, memory, and learning but also our ability to sense how we feel and why and to read emotions in other people.

Although “intentional focus” – the ability to focus the mind when we choose to do so – greatly enhances our effectiveness in all spheres of life, the author also suggests that there is some value to letting the mind wander at times when a person is free not to focus on any particular thing or task. Goleman speaks of the intuitive or subconscious mind which may manifest in a kind of daydreaming. It turns out that about half of our thoughts during the day are daydreams. He notes many examples of scientists and mathematicians who, in times of relaxation and recreation, have found a sudden insight to a problem that they have been unable to solve in their conscious attempts. He suggests that, along with cultivating focus, we also have to find time for these moments of relaxation to occur.

For many of us it's a luxury just to get some uninterrupted private moments during the day when we can lean back and reflect. Yet those count as some of the most valuable moments in our day, especially when it comes to creativity. But there's something more required if those associations are to bear fruit in a viable innovation: the right atmosphere. We need free time where we can sustain an open awareness. The nonstop onslaught of email, texts, bills to pay – life's "full catastrophe" – throws us into a brain state antithetical to the open focus where serendipitous discoveries thrive.

According to Goleman, if we are constantly barraged by calls and texts and emails, these incessant distractions “fracture” the attention, and the wandering mind never has a chance to come forward. He quotes Albert Einstein as saying, “The intuitive mind is a sacred gift and the rational mind is a faithful servant. We have created a society that honors the servant and has forgotten the gift.”

The most vivid illustration of “fractured attention” is the multitasking that has become so much more prevalent since the advent of the devices and screens which dominate modern life. Goleman actually calls multitasking “the bane of efficiency.” Attention, cognitive science tells us, has a limited capacity, referred to as “working memory.” We can hold just so much in our mind at any given moment. In multitasking, the “working memory” takes in information from one focus, then the other, filling up its capacity in a chaotic and inefficient way. Goleman sees multitasking as definitely counterproductive. “Attention span” is the ability to sustain focused attention for a period of time. Goleman notes that in the time since smart phones have become popular the attention span of teens in particular, but also of adults, has become measurably shorter. The ability to read and comprehend more complex language (i.e., longer sentences and language expressing more complex ideas) has diminished.

The second section of the book concerns utilizing the understanding of focus gained from cognitive science to become more effective in all aspects and activities of our life. Goleman points out that the ability to focus is like a muscle: use it poorly and it can wither; work it well and it grows. Scientific findings point to ways we can strengthen this vital “muscle” of the mind. Even at a young age people can be trained to improve their cognitive control, such as by learning to delay gratification and widening the gap between impulse and action. Various training scenarios have been shown to enhance trainees’ focus, even for people as young as pre-school age. The author points out, however, that the growth of focus does not happen without intention and discipline.

In cognitive science, focus is roughly divided into three types: inner-focus, outer-focus, and other-focus. A well-lived life demands that we be nimble in each. Inner-focus is self-awareness. It includes being aware of and able to manage emotions. Inner-focus is what keeps tabs on what we’re doing and whether we are staying true to our sense of purpose, value, and meaning. Goleman notes that meditation techniques almost always involve inner-focus.

“Whenever you notice your mind wandering,” a fundamental instruction in meditation advises, “bring your mind back to its point of focus.” The operative phrase here is whenever you notice. As our mind drifts off, we almost never notice the moment it launches into some other orbit on its own.

To notice that the mind has wandered off task and to bring it back requires the self-awareness developed through inner-focus.

The antidote for mind wandering is meta-awareness, attention to attention itself, as in the ability to notice that you are not noticing what you should, and correcting your focus. Mindfulness makes this crucial attention muscle stronger.

Both in meditation practice and in daily life, the main distractions that interrupt our ability to focus the attention and be effective in whatever we're doing come from within our own mind.

It's not the chatter of people around us that is the most powerful distractor, but rather the chatter of our own minds. Utter concentration demands these inner voices be stilled. Start to subtract sevens successively from 100 and, if you keep your focus on the task, your chatter zone goes quiet.

Inner-focus lets us experience our own thoughts objectively, so that we can make conscious choices about how to act. Goleman writes, "Instead of being swept away by that stream we can pause and see that these are just thoughts – and choose whether or not to act on them."

Outer-focus is awareness of systems outside us, whether human or natural. Human systems are the man-made structures, processes, and conventions that we encounter every day. Natural systems comprise all of the natural world, plants and animals, and the environment. Outer-focus helps us navigate our lives. If we are too distracted to notice what is essential and what is peripheral in the systems around us, we will be ineffective in our lives and make unnecessary errors in judgment.

Other-focus concerns a person's cognitive, emotional, and empathic understanding of other people. With other focus we appreciate what others are thinking and what they are feeling. This focused awareness naturally leads to compassion, to wanting to help other people. Goleman cautions:

Moral sentiments derive from empathy, and moral reflections take thinking and focus. One cost of the frenetic stream of distractions we face today, some fear, is an erosion of empathy and compassion. The more distracted we are, the less we can exhibit attunement and caring.

This book is an enjoyable read, rich in illustrative examples and not overburdened with jargon or technical information. It shows that developing

a better ability to focus makes for a better life: personally, professionally, and in relationships. It makes a compelling connection between focus and meditation. The author sees meditation as a key means to enhanced focus and all the benefits that it brings. He writes that meditation practice

strengthens focus, particularly executive control, working memory capacity, and the ability to sustain attention. Some of these benefits can be seen with as little as twenty minutes of practice for just 4 days (though the longer the training, the more sustained the effects).

This book is for anyone who seeks a better balanced, happier, and more productive life and for anyone with an interest in meditation and its benefits.

