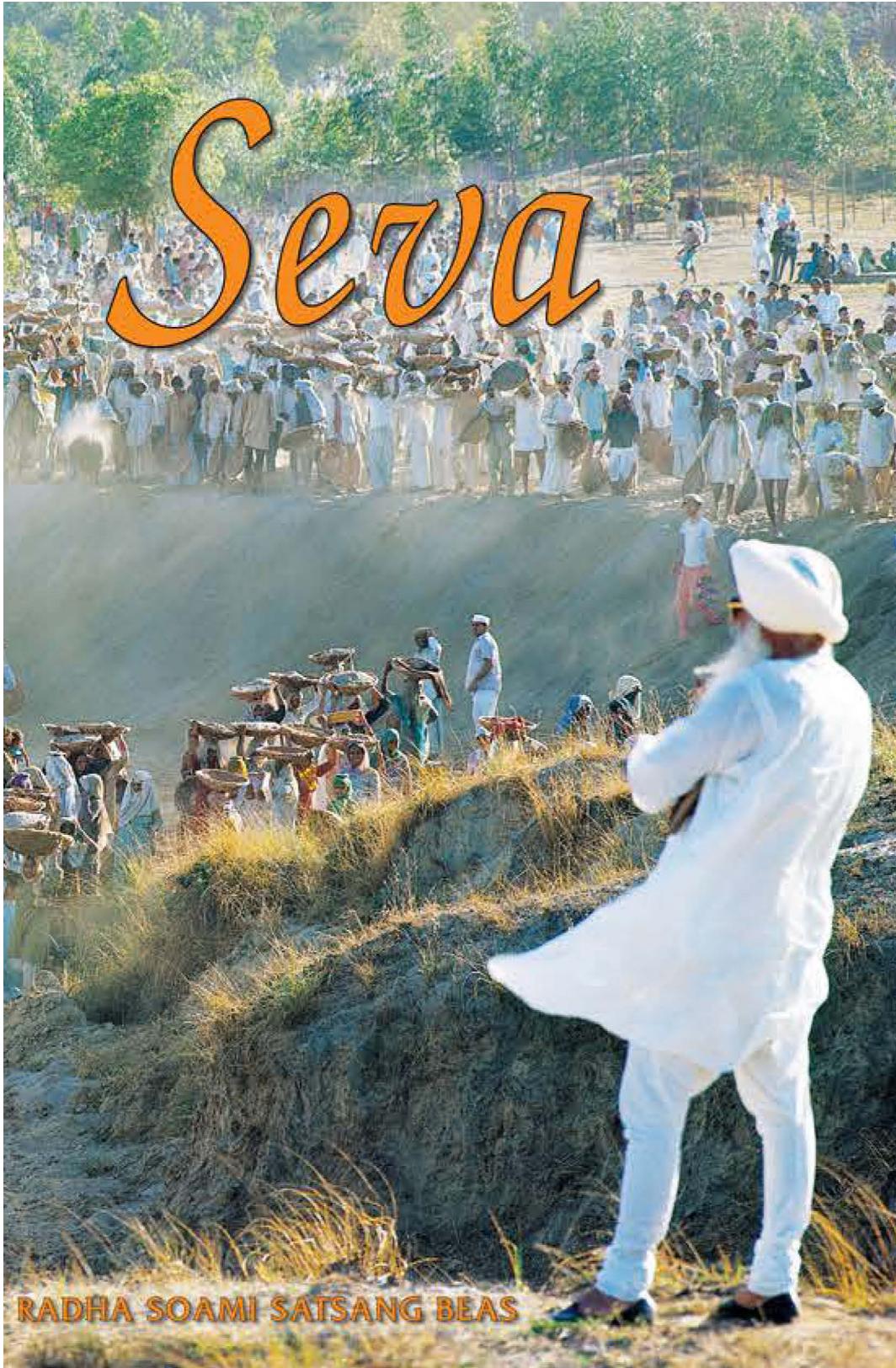


Seva

A large group of people, many wearing white clothing, are gathered near a body of water. Some are carrying items on their heads or shoulders. In the foreground, a man in a white turban and long white coat stands with his back to the camera, looking towards the group. The scene is outdoors with trees in the background.

RADHA SOAMI SATSANG BEAS

Seva

Superior to all is the servant of all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH JI

Seva

Leena Chawla Rajan

RADHA SOAMI SATSANG BEAS

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tum te sev
tum te jap taapa
tum te tat pachhaaniyo.

From you, I have learned to serve;
From you, I have learned to meditate;
From you, I have realized the essence of reality.

GURU ARJAN DEV¹

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Seva is literally 'service' or 'selfless action'. Seva means serving others rather than focusing solely on our own wants or needs. It is a reflection of our higher nature and part of our true purpose as human beings – to help one another. The foundation of seva is love and devotion for the Father. The desire to do seva comes from within and is motivated by love. Seva is first and foremost about the attitude with which we serve others – of love, humility and selflessness.

When Baba Ji was asked how he thought of himself, he answered, "as a sevadar." That simple statement embodies the humility and selfless dedication of the master in his service to the sangat. It also gives us a guideline to follow as we travel on the spiritual path. We want to serve the master because we want to help him in his seva and because we want to emulate our master.

The masters always emphasize that if we want to become more spiritual, we need to first become good human beings – that is, we need to become truly human. By serving others, by embodying the ideals of a selfless way of life, we learn to imbibe the qualities that define true humanity. The greatest reward in seva is the contentment and happiness that we feel when we get an opportunity to serve someone else.

On many occasions the masters have discussed the importance of seva. This book explores the many different aspects of

seva, such as the different types of seva, the need for harmony, self-discipline, obedience, attitude, listening, balance, and the most important seva of all, meditation. All the other forms of seva help to build a conducive atmosphere and foundation for our daily spiritual practice.

As human beings we can apply a sense of purpose to our lives and make choices based on a desire to live a more noble life, thus moving forward in our evolution towards becoming truly spiritual. If we don't consider the needs of others but focus only on our own selfish desires, we lose an opportunity to increase our love for others and for the master.

This book attempts to encapsulate and share some aspects of a life of seva and the ways in which seva can "complete" us – to help us grow as human beings, in dedication to our master. It is hoped that the sangat will find the book useful as a guide and inspiration.

D. K. Sikri
Secretary
Radha Soami Satsang Beas

The Foundation

*deh dhare ka gun yahi de de kachhu de,
bahuri na dehi paa'iyee ab ki de so de.*

Give, give, O friend, and then give again
as long as you are alive.

You may not get this human body again,
so while in this body, give!

KABIR²

ONE

What Is Seva?

Seva is love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³

Seva means to serve selflessly. In every age and in every spiritual tradition, great saints have come into this world to teach us about love and about service as the way to love. We often talk about love and service, but what do these words really mean? Let's consider these two concepts from the perspective of mystic teachings.

Love is the goal

Saints come to teach us something we have forgotten, that God is an infinite ocean of love and our soul is a drop of this ocean – that our very essence is love. Baba Ji* has said that love is the core of our being; without it we would not exist.

Our soul, however, has been held captive in this creation by the mind, in birth after birth, over aeons of time. But the soul never forgets. It longs for peace and rest. It yearns to be reunited with its source. This yearning manifests as a deep loneliness, a longing for something we can't quite define.

* Except where indicated 'Baba Ji' refers to the present master in Beas, Baba Gurinder Singh.

If the beloved and the lover are separated, the lover cannot be happy, no matter what you give him, no matter how comfortably he may be living... So long as the soul is separated from the divine ocean, from the Lord, it can never find peace in this creation.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁴

If our soul is love and God is love, then the path to reunion must be a path of love.

God is love, and love was in the beginning. The entire creation is the result of love. We have been sent down into this world through love, and the cause of our return will also be love.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁵

The purpose of our life, then, is simply to learn how to love:

You live that you may learn to love.
 You love that you may learn to live.
 No other lesson is required of man.
 And what is it to love but for the lover
 to absorb forever the beloved
 so that the twain be one?

THE BOOK OF MIRDAD⁶

Mystics speak of love in a way that wakes us up: Love means to dissolve the separate 'self' and merge into the One, to become whole. Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh* also defined love in terms of the ultimate union:

* Maharaj Charan Singh is referred to as 'Hazur' or 'Hazur Maharaj Ji' in this book.

Love means to become another being, to merge into another one, to lose your own identity... Then only the Lord exists and we are no more. That is love.⁷

To journey from separation to union – to oneness – is to fulfil the supreme possibility of human life.

The path of love

When we cannot even see the Lord, how can we learn to love so completely that we lose ourselves in that ocean of Love? How can one who is blind find the one who sees?

*agam agochar prabh abhinaasi
poore gur te jaate.*

God is inaccessible, incomprehensible,
and imperishable;
He is known through the true guru.

GURU ARJAN DEV⁸

Aware of our limitations, the Lord has sent spiritual guides into this world in every age. This is because we learn best from another living person – someone who speaks like us and goes through similar challenges in life, someone we can listen to, laugh with, respect, and love. These saints and mystics are the embodiment of love. They come on a mission of mercy, to help souls filled with longing find their way home. They teach us that human beings have been given the unique potential to experience the formless, limitless Being within the self. And they teach us the way to do this.

Both soul and God are love, but saints share with us the missing piece of the puzzle. There is a bridge, they tell us, between the soul and the Lord. This bridge is the creative power called Shabd or Nam. Nam is the dynamic power of the Lord that

created, sustains, and permeates the entire creation. It manifests in the inner spiritual realms as sound and light. In different mystic traditions this primal power has been referred to by different names – the Word, Name, Holy Ghost, Holy Spirit, Logos, Kalma, Nad, Dhun, Dao, and many more.

This power is pure love. Everything that exists has emanated from it, and it gives life to every cell of every living being. When souls left the Creator and descended into the creation, they did so on the wave of Shabd. And if an individual soul longs to return to the Lord, it can do so only by reconnecting with this wave of love.

*naamai hi te sabh kichh hoà
bin satgur naam na jaapai.*

Everything comes from Nam,
the Name of the Lord;
Without the true guru,
Nam is not experienced.

GURU AMAR DAS⁹

The Shabd and the living master are the two pillars of the inner path. But we might ask, “If the Shabd or Nam resounds within every cell of our being, why can’t we hear it? And why do we need a living master to connect us with it?”

Hazur Maharaj Ji would often answer these questions with the analogy of a radio, saying that even if the air were filled with radio waves reverberating with beautiful music, a radio that is not connected to electricity would not be able to catch the sound. We have to connect the radio with a power source and tune it to the right frequency; only then can we hear the music. When the master initiates us into the spiritual practice he brings us in contact with the spiritual power source – the

Shabd. He then teaches the technique of meditation – the technique of tuning in to the divine melody of Shabd, which captivates our attention and pulls us within.

This essential connection with the Shabd cannot be made by reading books. Maharaj Sawan Singh explains: “The inner secrets cannot be expressed in words, either spoken or written. They can be explained only by the perfect master of the time.”¹⁰ To take even the first step on the inner way, the master’s loving guidance is essential. Initiation into the path cements a deep bond between master and disciple, and we experience this bond through the daily practice of meditation.

There are so many relationships of love, but no relationship is stronger, no bond is stronger than that of the disciple and the master.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹¹

Meditation is a solitary practice, done in the quiet of our own homes. There are no outer rituals or ceremonies to follow. To support the meditation practice, the master advises a particular way of life. We take four lifetime vows: to abstain from meat, fish, fowl, and eggs, and anything containing their essence; to abstain from alcohol, mind-altering drugs, marijuana products, and tobacco; to live an honest, moral life; and to meditate for at least two and a half hours every day. We are also encouraged to be self-supporting and to continue living in society, fulfilling our worldly responsibilities to the best of our ability.

This, in a nutshell, is the path of love taught by the saints. Our task is simply to live the way of life taught by the master and to practise connecting with the Shabd every day through meditation – to slowly tune in to that power of God’s love.

Seva bends the mind Godward

In its initial stages, the journey of the soul is in fact the journey of the mind.

Love has to start with the mind. The soul is always in love with the Father. . . . We are trying to create love in the mind, so that the soul gets release from the mind. And then automatically the soul will go back to the Father.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹²

To create love in the mind, we first want to understand the nature and function of the mind. Mystics say that when the pristine soul became separated from the Lord and entered the creation, it had to associate itself with the mind to be able to function in this material plane. But the mind is mesmerized by the world and its endless objects of desire. And its nature is never to be still. Responding to the pull of the five senses, it jumps from one thought to the next and from one desire to the next. In the process, the mind compels us to take action – to perform karmas – to get what it wants. But the universal law is that every action has a consequence. To reap the consequences of our actions, we have no choice but to take birth again and again. As a result, both soul and mind remain stuck in this creation.

The mind also carries an inborn sense of I-ness, of ego – the sense of being separate from everyone and everything – which is a huge obstacle on the path of love:

Ego is a block between us and God. Without elimination of ego, the question of meeting the Lord doesn't arise at all, because God is love. . . . Love means that the other one exists – you don't exist at all. Ego is just the reverse: Only you exist and nobody else exists at all. They are poles apart.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹³

Hazur used to say that a needle is always attracted by a magnet, but if there is a weight on the needle it becomes helpless. Similarly, the soul is always in love with the Father, but it has become helpless due to the weight of the mind.¹⁴

Our task is to create love in the mind, to make the mind *want* to turn from the world and return to its source. Two things are essential to reversing the attention of the mind – remembering the Lord and forgetting the self. This concept is central to all mystic paths and is beautifully portrayed by the story of Bulleh Shah’s first meeting with his future master, Inayat Shah. The master was transplanting onion seedlings when Bulleh Shah asked him how God could be found. Inayat Shah responded simply: “O Bullah, what problem is there in finding God? One’s attention only needs to be uprooted from here and planted there.”¹⁵

This is the essence of the path of love – to uproot our attention from the physical world and transplant it in the inner world. Hazur would explain that the mind will not detach itself from the pleasures of this world until we attach it to a “better pleasure” – the indescribable sweetness of Shabd or Nam. Once the mind becomes intoxicated by this celestial melody, it executes a U-turn, turning its attention from outer pleasures to the sweetness within.

This turning of the mind is the single most challenging aspect of walking the spiritual path, but once it is achieved the mind becomes a friend of the soul rather than its foe, and the rest of the journey becomes much easier. Along the way the mind comes to rest in its own source in the inner regions. Then the soul, finally freed from the weight of the mind, merges into the Lord.

dhun sun kar man samjhaa’i.
kot jatan se yah nahi maane,
dhun sun kar man samjhaa’i.

Listen to the melody of Shabd
 and bring your wayward mind into line.
 A million other methods will fail to tame it,
 it will submit only by listening to that melody.
 SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁶

If the path home is a path of love, it must also be a path of service, because love and service are inextricably entwined. In love we say “I give,” and in seva, too, we say “I give.” Both are selfless acts of giving. This is why Hazur says, “Seva is love.”

Seva plays a crucial role on the inner path because *the purpose of all seva is to bend the mind Godward*. Seva helps the mind execute that crucial U-turn. It slowly saturates the mind with love of God, cleanses and purifies the mind, and makes it worthy of connecting with the divine Shabd:

When you want to fill a utensil with milk or anything, you clean it first, otherwise whatever you put in it will just get spoiled. . . . So the purpose of seva is to clean our mind so that we can withdraw our consciousness to the eye centre and attach it to the Shabd and Nam.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁷

Whom do we serve?

Most of us devote our entire lives to loving and serving others – family, friends, employers, community, nation, and strangers in need. Our love, attention, and service tend to flow outward.

But saints come into our lives and expand our awareness and understanding. They tell us that both love and service function in two arenas – inner and outer. This concept is beautifully explained in the Bible. Once a seeker asked Jesus Christ, “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?” And Christ, quoting the Hebrew Bible, replied:

Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”¹⁸

With our limited perspective, we might think of love and service as functioning in two *separate* arenas – inward to the Lord and outward to our neighbours. But the mystics broaden and deepen our understanding: they say that love originates within, and it is only love for the Lord that can create true love in our heart for our neighbours. Why? Because, as Hazur explained:

To love thy neighbour means to see the Lord in everyone, everywhere. And that you can do only if you have fulfilled the first commandment.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁹

This is why the sequence of these commandments is significant. The first, the primary commandment, is to love the Lord, because love for the Lord will take us back to the Lord, and love for other beings will automatically flow from this. Love means seeing the Lord in everyone, and this comes through meditation. If instead we focus solely on loving and serving others, the realization that the Lord is in everyone may not necessarily arise within us – and our attachment to others may keep us bound to the creation.

Saints also expand our understanding of who is our ‘neighbour.’ Hazur explains:

My ‘neighbour’ does not mean only the one who resides next to my house... If I’m living in a house, the next house is my neighbour. If I’m living in one city, the next city is my neighbour. If I’m living in one country, the next

country is my neighbour. If I'm living on one continent, the next continent is my neighbour. It means the whole universe becomes my neighbour.²⁰

Hazur also clarifies that our neighbours are not just other human beings, but all creatures.²¹ When asked why a vegetarian diet is advised on the spiritual path, he responded:

Christ said, love thy neighbour. All creatures are our neighbours. . . . When you love anybody, you do not kill that individual; and when we love the whole creation, we cannot kill intentionally, nor could we find it in our heart to have it done for us by someone else.²²

So the saints' guidance is first to love and serve the Lord. This enables us to see the Beloved "in everyone, everywhere" and awakens the natural instinct within us to love and serve our neighbour as ourself.

But how can we love and serve the unknown, unseen Lord? And how can we know the right attitude with which to serve our neighbours? For this we need a true master. Saints and mystics are the ultimate examples of service – they are sevadars of the Lord. They are sent into this world to serve those who seek the Lord, and in uniting souls with God they perform the highest service. In their compassion and love they provide a mirror in which we come to see the same potential for love and service within ourselves. From them we learn how to serve both the Lord and other beings.

Therefore the answer to the question, Whom do we serve? is that we serve the true master:

One should render all types of service to the dear ones of the Lord [the mystics], because no wealth, no sovereignty

and no high status in life can equal the reward of this service. . . . The master or the guru is the treasurer of God's wealth. Therefore, we shall certainly attain God-realization if we serve our master.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²³

The master teaches us how to serve the Lord, and how to serve others.

Inner seva

Our most important work in this precious life is to unite our soul with the Lord. To help us accomplish this, the master teaches us how to meditate. Meditation is our inner seva – our service of the soul – the highest service we can perform.

Meditation has three components: *simran*, *dhyan*, and *bhajan*. Simran is the practice of silent repetition, and dhyan is the practice of contemplation. Together they still the mind and draw the soul-consciousness to the eye centre, where the Shabd resounds. Bhajan is the practice of attaching the soul-consciousness to the Shabd, listening to its divine melody, and yielding to its upward pull. Meditation can be referred to as *surat shabd seva* – the service of attaching our soul-consciousness (*surat*) with the Shabd within. It is a gift that comes with the immense grace of God:

*karam hovai satguru milaaye.
seva surat shabad chit laaye.*

By the Lord's grace is the true guru met,
and then alone is one's heart fixed
in the service of attuning the soul with Shabd.

GURU AMAR DAS²⁴

Why is meditation referred to as a service? Hazur explains that when we meditate we serve our soul and thus the Lord:

Seva means to serve someone. So we are serving ourselves. It's a service of the soul. . . . You see, now we do not realize that our real self is the soul. We think our real self is the ego, the body, the mind. To begin to realize that the reality is the soul, not the body or the ego, is also service. We are taking pity on ourselves, so to say – taking pity on the soul.

Since the soul ultimately has to become the Father, this service is known as service to the Father.²⁵

Outer seva

The spiritual path involves many parallels in the outer and inner worlds – outer and inner master, outer and inner darshan, outer and inner satsang, and outer and inner seva. Initially we fall in love with the outer master, darshan, satsang, and seva. This deepens our faith and love, and with that our longing for what is within begins to grow.

The master uses the 'outer' to draw us in. Why do we send children to school? Why don't we give them books and tell them to study at home? Because school provides an atmosphere that is conducive to learning; without it, learning would be very difficult. Similarly, meditation is the inner work we do in the quiet of our own homes. But we need some support. We gain inspiration for our inner work in the school of 'outer' learning.

One might assume that meditation on its own would be powerful enough to turn our attention within. It is. But just as we begin sitting still, just beginning to surrender to the inner master, even then our ego starts fighting back. This is where outer seva comes in. We are used to doing things for our own benefit and in our own way; but when we serve others without expecting anything in return, the element of personal gain is removed and the ego begins to dissolve.

External seva definitely helps us in every way. It helps to eliminate ego from us. We are so conscious of our rank, our wealth, our status, our achievements. These things make us so egoistic, and seva helps to eliminate all that. It brings us to the human level.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁶

To support the lifelong process of dissolving our ego, the master gives us three kinds of outer seva – seva with body, with wealth, and with mind. When we serve with body and wealth, we take an action to serve someone other than ourselves. When we serve with the mind, we take the solitary, inner action needed to redirect our mind towards God. Together these three kinds of seva create an atmosphere that encourages our inner seva – meditation, or seva of the soul.

Seva with the body

The first kind of outer seva is seva with the body, physical service, known as *tan seva*. When we do any kind, compassionate, or helpful act for anyone, we are doing seva with the body. And when we do physical service for the master or the sangat – cook food, build a shed, break bricks, plant trees, or guide traffic into the parking areas – we are doing seva with the body.

Hazur explains the primary reason for doing physical seva:

Seva of the body is when we serve people with our body, so that we may eliminate ego from within ourselves and be filled with humility.²⁷

Physical seva is a great equalizer. We work shoulder to shoulder with people from all backgrounds. If a basket of food needs to be carried from one place to another, our status doesn't matter – we all carry the same food.

Physical seva is nothing but love in action. To provide help or support to someone, expecting no personal benefit, is to experience love. Only human beings are born with this divine endowment – the capacity to have empathy for all forms of life and the intellect to administer whatever help is needed. To get such an opportunity is a gift.

If we can do anything to help anybody, we should. That is our duty – we are meant to help each other. Humans are meant to help humans. Who else will help? Birds and plants won't come to help you – you have to help each other. . . . Your heart should be very, very soft to other people and you should be very compassionate, very kind.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁸

Seva with wealth

The second kind of outer seva is service with wealth, known as *dhan seva*. True saints do not want or need our wealth, and they never ask for money. They live on their own income and always contribute to the welfare of others. They tell us that if a master accepts money or gifts from his disciples for his personal use, he is not a master at all:

*gur peer sadaaye mangan jaaye.
ta kai mool na lageeyai paaye.
ghaal khaaye kichh hathoh de.
Nanak raah pachhaaneh se.*

Never fall at the feet of such a one
who calls himself a Guru but goes around begging.
He who eats what he earns through his earnest labour
and from his hand gives something in charity –
He alone, O Nanak, knows the true way of life.

GURU NANAK DEV²⁹

True mystics are the greatest of givers. Their teachings are free. Initiation is free. And they freely give their time and attention to spiritual seekers, often at great cost to their own health. Everything they do is a gift of love.

If we donate money in seva, the master utilizes our contribution to serve others – to feed and accommodate the congregation, to construct sheds for holding discourses, to build and run hospitals where all patients are treated alike and free of charge, and to support other charitable causes beyond the institution, such as helping victims of natural disasters.

Kabir Sahib explains the importance of giving charity:

*jo jal baarrhai naav mein,
ghar mein baarrhai daam;
do'u haath uleechiye yehi sajjan kau kaam.*

Water within a boat
and wealth hoarded in a house –
Throw them out with both hands;
this is the wise thing to do.³⁰

Kabir Sahib cautions that too much wealth has the potential to ‘drown’ us, to make us lose our sense of values and ethics. Excess wealth can attach us to this world, inflate our ego, and give us a false sense of superiority – all obstacles on the inner way.

Serving with our wealth presents us with the opportunity to detach ourselves from material things. We practise letting go of material ‘security’ and learn instead to place our trust in the Lord. This trust helps us let go of some of the worries and cares that play on the mind and brings greater equanimity. This is why every spiritual tradition has placed a value on giving.

We don’t have to be rich to give, but when we give – whatever we are able to afford – it is good to be judicious. Mystics remind us that charity should not be given blindly, without

regard to whether the recipient will use the money wisely. If we give money to someone knowing that they are likely to misuse it, then our charity would be misguided, and we might actually be enabling their misbehaviour:

There's no harm in giving money in charity to deserving institutions, to deserving people, helping people who are really in need. But giving to those people who will use it for drugs or alcohol or who will just waste the money in sensual pleasures is no good at all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³¹

The attitude with which we give also matters. If we expect praise, recognition, gratitude, or anything else in return – then we are not giving selflessly. Great Master, quoting Christ, would advise that the left hand should not know when the right hand gives.³²

Brother, charity should come from the heart. . . . That is the first thing. Then, it should never be done to blow your own trumpet, as Christ says – just to gain public appreciation and impress people. We should never bargain with the Father – that if I give you one thousand dollars, you will give me twenty thousand dollars in the next birth or thirty thousand dollars in the next birth. That is not charity. . . . We do charity for our own good. He has given us so much surplus, and we want to use it in the service of his creation so that we may get detached from it.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³³

Seva with the mind

The third kind of outer seva is seva with the mind, known as *man seva*. A simple definition of seva of the mind is: Anything

we do to control the mind and turn it towards God is seva of the mind. The essence of seva of the mind is captured by Hazur in this quote:

Living the Sant Mat way of life and creating a foundation for meditation is seva of the mind.³⁴

Here Hazur is saying that living the way of life advised by the master will create a foundation for our daily meditation. When we use our discrimination and willpower to make the small, daily sacrifices necessary to follow the four vows, we are doing seva with our mind. When we are kind and loving to others in thought, word, and deed, that too is service with our mind. All of this creates a foundation for meditation. Similarly, when we attend satsang or read spiritual literature and then imbibe those teachings and make them a part of our lives, we are doing seva with our mind. And when we remember the master by doing simran in our free moments, we are also bringing our mind into serving him.

In truth, anything we do to turn the mind within and bring it to the eye centre is seva of the mind. Hazur has also referred to the practice of simran and dhyan as seva of the mind:

With the help of simran and dhyan, we withdraw our consciousness back to the eye centre and hold it there – that is seva of the mind.³⁵

As long as we are still operating in the realm of the mind, every spiritual effort we make involves seva of the mind.

At the core of seva of the mind is our *attitude*, our frame of mind that we bring to seva, no matter what type of seva we are performing. Only when seva is infused with the selfless desire to serve others with love, humility, and detachment can it truly be called seva.

It is the attitude of the mind that really matters.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶

Seva of the mind plays a pivotal role in our quest to bend the mind Godward – helping us to live the Sant Mat way life and create a foundation for all our actions, including our meditation. Maintaining an attitude of humility and selflessness weaves a golden thread of love through whatever seva we perform, enriching everything we do.

*dhan dhan suhaavi safal ghari
jit har seva man bhaani.*

Blessed is the moment when one loves
the service of the Guru.

GURU RAM DAS³⁷

Outer seva is enormously helpful in creating an atmosphere that supports our inner seva, but it is nonetheless a means to an end, “a help, not a must.” as Hazur used to say. To attain liberation, meditation is essential.

Real seva is meditation – withdrawing your consciousness back to the eye centre and attaching it to the divine light or melody within, attaching it to the sound within. Other sevas are means to that end.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁸

An integrated whole

While there are four kinds of seva – physical, wealth, mind, and soul – this book is largely focused on the first of these: physical seva, or seva of the body. But even as we engage in physical seva we realize that it is never an isolated activity – physical seva is of value only when done with the correct attitude of mind.

Physical seva and mental seva work in concert to support our meditation practice.

Each form of seva is a gift that helps our mind stay close to the master in its own unique way. Each seva complements and completes the others. Over time we stop experiencing the different sevas as distinct and separate, and seva – as an integrated whole – becomes an intrinsic and joyous part of life. Seva is a journey, not a destination. Seva carries us along the stream of life, enhancing our journey and enriching our life experience.

Slowly we discover the beautiful system the master has created to turn the direction of our mind. We discover that every facet of the spiritual path is connected to the whole in the most profound way: the four kinds of seva, the four vows, the way of life, and the inspiration of darshan and satsang – all work together to support our aspiration to find our way within.

*man dhan jee'ò pind sabh tumra
ih tan seeto tumrai dhaan.*

My mind, wealth, life, and body all belong to you.
My body is absorbed in your meditation.

GURU ARJAN DEV³⁹

TWO

What Is Physical Seva?

Everything we have, our time and talents, our energy and experience, our wealth and wisdom, our knowledge and influence, our life itself – is a loan given to us to be passed on to those whose need is greater than ours.

J. P. VASWANI⁴⁰

Drawn by the spiritual fragrance of the saints, people flock to them in great numbers. Arrangements have to be made for those who come – to house them all, cook food for them, prepare and clean bathrooms, staff hospitals for those who get sick. As the crowd of seekers swells to hundreds of thousands, a myriad of details must be managed. Sevadars are the volunteers who assist the master in his divine mission by taking care of the seekers who come to his refuge.

How does one become a sevadar? All that is necessary is the desire to serve. We ask for seva with an attitude of openness and willingness to accept any task. We pick up a shovel or a rake, or sweep a room, or make some food – and we become a sevadar. But we don't need to be at a satsang centre to be helpful; simply being a good, kind human being is a great service to humanity. Right where we are, doing whatever we are doing in life, there is always an opportunity to help someone. We only

need to be aware and want to do it, and opportunities to serve will present themselves.

In fact, we serve others simply by living the four vows. First, by adopting a vegetarian diet, we spare animals tremendous pain and suffering. Second, under the influence of drugs and alcohol we can commit terrible acts and cause distress to others; so when we avoid these substances we are serving others by sparing them turmoil and pain. Third, when we lie, cheat or steal, or when we are unfaithful to our spouse, we hurt others; so our pledge to live an honest, moral life is a service to those around us. And finally, the vow to meditate every day fills us with love for the Lord and consequently with love and compassion for all living beings. Through these four vows we practise the doctrine of *ahimsa*, of non-violence towards others and towards ourselves as well. With these vows the master has woven the spirit of love and service into the very fabric of our life.

Seva is an attitude

When we become sevadars, it is good to be clear at the very outset what seva is and what it is not. The master advises us not to define seva in a narrow way. Hazur says that seva is love. *Any* action done selflessly is seva. This means that anything we do – at home, at work, for our children, for a stranger, or for fellow disciples – is seva, provided it is done with love, with no ulterior motive, and with no desire for reward or compensation.

So seva is not just an action, it is an attitude – an attitude of giving. Baba Ji once said that if you are given something, always give more in return, so you always give more than you receive. Great Master used to say that our hands should always be extended to give, rather than spread open to receive.⁴¹

A young woman once applied for seva at her local satsang centre. She was given occasional tasks but it was a small centre and there wasn't enough seva to go around. This young woman

had a strong instinct to serve. She was moved by the plight of the slum dwellers in her neighbourhood and wanted to do something to help them. So she involved her friends and created a non-profit organization. It started out small – serving people a hot meal once a week. Over time, as she got to know the residents better, she became more aware of their specific problems. Children needed textbooks and school uniforms; an old woman needed medicines; the bread-winner of a family needed heart surgery. Full of compassion, this young disciple and her friends spent several hours each week raising funds and helping the people in need. After some time she discontinued her seva at the satsang centre to devote more time to them.

At a meeting in the Dera someone asked the master if what she was doing would still count as seva. Baba Ji replied that we have a wrong concept that seva has to be associated with a religious institution. Seva is an attitude, he said. If any service is done with a selfless attitude, it is seva. When a mother serves her child without thought for herself, it is seva. He said that even when we work at an office where we get paid, to the extent that we go beyond the call of duty without expecting anything in return, it is seva.

Seva is selflessness

Mystics place the concept of serving with an attitude of selflessness (*nishkaam*) as the very definition of seva. *Nish* means ‘without’ and *kaam* means ‘desire.’ So *nishkaam* means to do seva with an attitude of service to others without any selfish desire.

In ancient Indian literature it is said that Arjuna once asked Lord Krishna why he considered Karna to be such a generous donor.* What did Karna have that he, Arjuna, lacked? In

* In the *Mahabharata*, Lord Krishna was Arjuna’s cousin and spiritual mentor. Karna was Arjuna’s chief rival.

response, Lord Krishna turned a mountain into gold. He told Arjuna that he wanted the gold to be distributed among the poor villagers who lived at the base of the mountain. Excited by the importance of the task, Arjuna began to dig up the mountain and distribute the gold. Initially he basked in the gratitude and praise showered on him by the villagers. But soon he realized that no matter how much he dug, the gold would never finish. Exhausted, he told Lord Krishna that he needed to rest.

Next, Lord Krishna assigned the same task to Karna. Karna called the villagers and told them the gold was a gift from Lord Krishna, and they could take as much as they wanted. He had his soldiers facilitate the process and they helped the villagers take the gold away in an orderly manner.⁴²

In this story both Arjuna and Karna were given the same seva task, but Karna approached it with no desire. He didn't care about the value of the gold. He had no desire to be perceived as a great giver in the eyes of the villagers. He did only what he was told to do, then walked away when the service was done – with no calculation or attachment. In Arjuna's case, when he was assigned the seva, he got bogged down with the task of personally and visibly distributing the gold, because he desired the praise and importance that came with it. His service was not selfless.

One of the most significant lessons Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna in the Indian scripture *Bhagavad Gita* is to perform actions without being motivated by the result – the fruit – of the actions:

You have the right to work,
 but never to the fruit of work.
 You should never engage in action
 for the sake of reward,
 nor should you long for inaction.

BHAGAVAD GITA 2:47⁴³

Nishkaam seva has two facets – selflessness and detachment. A spirit of selflessness is at the very heart of seva. If we have any expectation of reward when we serve, or if we put conditions on the act of giving, then we are not giving; we are taking. The whole point of service is to put the ego aside and to give selflessly.

But saints urge us to take it a step further – to serve not just with selflessness, but also with detachment. This may seem counter-intuitive. Shouldn't we be deeply involved and empathetic when we serve? What is the need to be detached in seva? Maharaj Jagat Singh gives us the first reason. He says that any attachment – even to good causes – can distract us from our primary seva, the work of going within:

To be helpful and selfless is certainly good, but we should not identify ourselves with such work. We should help in a detached spirit and to the extent that it does not constitute a burden on our minds. Perform your social duties and discharge your obligations, but do not neglect your own proper work which is that of going 'in.'⁴⁴

The second reason for detachment in seva is that attachments bind us to the creation. If we devote our entire lives to helping others but there is some calculation or attachment embedded in those actions, we will enmesh ourselves more fully in this world. On the other hand, if we do the same good deeds without any personal desire, motive, or expectation, they will carry no burden. In short, normal actions occur in the realm of cause and effect, action and reaction, motive and expectation; selfless actions do not, because they are free from desire:

Good actions should be performed disinterestedly, without any desire to secure and enjoy their fruit. If actions are done in this way, they will bear no fruit, even as roasted

seeds do not sprout. If good actions are performed with longing for their fruit, rebirth is inevitable, to enjoy the fruit of such karma.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁴⁵

Selfless service to the general community is certainly seva. This book, however, focuses on selfless seva under the guidance of a living spiritual master.

Seva can be done through service to our spiritual community (the sangat) or to our community in general. The advantage of serving our spiritual community is that it puts us under the direct guidance of our master. Such service develops the relationship of disciple and master – a discipline that is key to the transformative process of the spiritual path.

LIVING MEDITATION⁴⁶

In such seva, a person's primary motivation to serve is love for the master. Unlike other types of service, where individuals often choose whom they want to serve and how they want to serve, sevadars are generally happy to accept whatever seva is offered to them. Whether the master tells them to sweep a hall or serve in a hospital or build homes for earthquake victims, they will gladly do so. Although they may feel deep compassion for their fellow beings, it doesn't matter to them how and where that compassion manifests. The responsibility for the service is now the master's, and the results are also in his hands.

The master teaches that true selflessness cannot be achieved through outer work alone. For satsangis, the advantage of selfless seva done under the guidance of the master is that it leads us to meditation. This inner work deepens the relationship between master and disciple. And where our love is, there we will go.

The guru is free from all ties and attachments. He is an ocean full of the surging waves of love. By serving him we become free from ties and attachments to the ephemeral world. Then intense love of God is awakened in us.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁴⁷

Seva is not compulsory

Physical seva is not included in the four vows taken at the time of initiation. It is entirely voluntary. It is possible to live a life of devoted service to others without ever doing physical seva in a satsang centre.

For an initiate, the vows must always take precedence over physical seva. Following the vows is our most important work. Physical seva has enormous benefits, but it is something additional we do to foster our spiritual life.

Seva comes from the heart. It is not a compulsion for anybody – it's not that you have to do it, but you want to do it. It must come from within, and there must be love in doing seva. There should be no feelings of obligation that we have to do it.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁴⁸

Seva is not a job

Although the tasks we do in seva may be very similar to those we do in a job where we are employed, there are distinct differences between the two. A job lies firmly in the domain of reciprocity and reward. We receive a remuneration for the work we do, and if we work hard and produce results, we are more likely to get a raise and move up the ladder. But in seva we earn no salary and there are no measurable rewards. We could spend a lifetime doing seva and have nothing to show for it outwardly. We do seva purely out of love.

In a professional job, we often polish and augment our résumé. Being visible, showing others what we've accomplished, and being appreciated are considered to be important. We look for praise. But in seva the goal is to eliminate the ego, so we don't call attention to our accomplishments.

In a profession, ambition is normal. We are motivated by a desire to move up the hierarchy, and if we don't, we are afraid of stagnating. As a result, competition between colleagues is common. But competition and ambition should have no place in seva. We should be willing to take on any task we are asked to do. We should be indifferent to our position in the organization because all seva roles in the eyes of the master are equal.

When we are employed, expectations and demands are normal. For example, when we reach a certain level of seniority in a company, we may expect to get certain visible acknowledgement or recognition, like the corner office or the prime parking space. If we don't get what we expect, we can choose to accept the decision or walk out and work elsewhere. But in seva we don't expect or demand privileges. We don't demand a particular seva and refuse to accept any other. If we make such demands, or threaten to walk out when they are not met, it's not seva.

Certain kinds of professions are focused on outcomes and numbers: quantities produced, revenues, profits, sales targets, incentives, and market share. But in seva we are not in the numbers game. The master doesn't want us to try to increase the number of disciples or be ambitious about opening more and more centres. He doesn't want us to compete with each other on who is accomplishing more. His only focus is on ensuring that we serve the sangat in the best way possible.

In a profession, a high degree of value is placed on skills, qualifications, and experience, and a lot of effort is made to match the right skills with the right job. In seva, this is true some of the time: software has to be written by someone who

is skilled at it, and a professional doctor is needed to deal with medical emergencies. However, in many seva projects, people's skills do not match the task. Our challenge then is to work with each other's inexperience, strengths, and weaknesses with patience, mutual respect, and love.

In a profession, we tend to get attached, and this brings a host of emotions – we hate the job, we love the job, we associate ourselves with a certain status or position, we get hurt by people, we get elated when praised and stressed when criticized. But in seva, the master teaches us to be detached – to do the work but leave the results in the hands of the one we serve.

In a job, we seldom feel great affection for our bosses and seniors. Selflessness, obedience, and surrender are not words typically used to describe our relationship with them. But seva comes from the heart. We love the master and want to serve him with body, mind, and soul.

The point is: outwardly a task may look the same when performed in a job or profession as in seva, but our *approach* to the task and our *goal* are different. Many of us come to physical seva directly from a work environment, so it is important to be aware of these distinctions. If we behave as if we are working in a company and approach our seva as a job, we will often make choices that don't belong in seva. We might be possessive about domains and departments. We might demand our rights. We might show off our achievements. We might compete with each other. We might be focused on being right rather than doing what is right. We might be ambitious about getting a bigger and bigger 'chair.' Our focus will be on ourselves rather than on serving others and pleasing the master.

Seva is love

If seva is love, as Hazur says, then no limitations can be placed on it, because love has no limits. This perspective completely opens up the meaning of seva.

First and foremost, if seva is love, it means that everyone can serve. We can never tell people that they are not fit to serve, for are we not all fit for love? If a particular department requires very specific skills that a candidate does not have, then space can be found for that person in another department. Seva should always be inclusive.

By the same token, for those of us who want to serve, this means that we cannot define seva in a limited way and seek only that seva which is attached to a badge, designation, or some form of outward recognition or prestige.

In one centre, a woman in her late sixties complained that it was unfair that she was not given seva because of her advanced age. But at the same centre, a man in his late eighties, stooped with age, would come early for satsang every Sunday. He had no assigned seva but he would diligently wipe down every chair in the satsang hall with great love and then move them forward or back by a few inches to make sure they were in neat, straight rows. In Hazur's time, during *mitti seva*, a blind woman who could not walk the terrain safely took care of the sangat's shoes and extra clothes. And an old man acted as a human 'keep left' sign between people with full baskets and people with empty ones. Seva is everywhere!

Love is universal. If seva is love, it cannot be confined within the narrow boundaries of serving only our fellow disciples. When the tenth Sikh guru, Guru Gobind Singh, was waging a war against the Mughals, one of his disciples, Bhai Kanhayya, was tasked with serving water to the wounded soldiers. Soon the guru began to get complaints that Bhai Kanhayya was serving water not just to their own soldiers but also to the enemy soldiers. When he was brought before the guru and asked about his actions, Bhai Kanhayya said, "My Lord, I am unable to distinguish enemies from friends. I see you in all of them – how can I refuse *you* a drink?" Hearing this, the guru said that Bhai Kanhayya had correctly understood his teachings and he

commented, “A person who has shed the veil of ignorance from his heart will treat everyone the same, whether Hindus or Turks.”⁴⁹

If we love the Lord, we love his creation, and we also want to serve his creation because we see the Lord in everyone that he has created.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁵⁰

If seva is love, then no seva is more or less important than any other. Love doesn't make distinctions. In the Indian epic *Ramayana*, when Lord Rama's wife was abducted by Ravana, the king of Lanka, a bridge had to be built from the mainland to the island to rescue her. Rama's army of monkeys got busy placing large boulders in the water. Overwhelmed by the urge to serve the Lord, a little squirrel started picking up pebbles and placing them alongside the boulders. She kept contributing in her own little way with utmost devotion. The monkeys scoffed at her meagre efforts. But when the disheartened squirrel was taken to Lord Rama, he blessed her for the dedication and devotion with which she had performed her service.

We cannot all do great things, but we can do small things with great love.

MOTHER TERESA⁵¹

Can we measure love? Someone may be a secretary, representative, or chairperson of a board, but in the master's eyes that sevadar is no more important than the traffic sevadar on the street standing for hours under the blazing sun, exposed to exhaust fumes while guiding the sangat into the centre. Baba Ji says that we are all links in a chain, and each link is essential to the whole chain. Hazur Maharaj Ji used to emphasize that seva is seva, and no seva is big or small.

Once a foreign sevadar was sitting next to Hazur during *mitti seva*. In those days four to five million cubic feet of earth was moved every year to level ravines and gullies, so that space could be created for satsang, the langar grounds, and more buildings. All this work was not being done by machines, but by sevadars picking up baskets of earth at one place, carrying them on their heads, and dropping them off at another place. After observing the seva for a while, the foreign sevadar asked Hazur: “Some people carry tremendous loads while others have hardly a handful in their basket. What is the use of their seva when they carry so little?” Hazur replied, “It is not how much is carried that is important, but the love and devotion with which the seva is done.”⁵²

If seva is love, then it follows that even if we are given a seemingly impossible challenge we can surmount it, because love can achieve anything. Baba Ji once gave someone the responsibility of managing a very large department. She was overwhelmed. “I don’t have the skills needed!” she exclaimed. “I will have to go back to school!” The master smilingly asked where she thought she could go to learn how to love. The master is telling us that our greatest strength is love. It is the primary skill we need to bring to the task.

Does God want our work? Or does he want our love? He wants that we should work for him in love.

J. P. VASWANI⁵³

Once, a young sevadar finished her seva at her local centre and walked over to her car. She passed a group of women sevadars trimming the lawn near the parking lot, happily chatting as they worked. Suddenly it began to drizzle. The women made a dash for the shelter of a shed nearby, but one old woman kept doing her seva.

The young sevadar left her car and walked over to her. “Sister,” she said, “why don’t you too take shelter in the shed until it stops raining? You will catch a cold.”

The older sevadar smiled and said: “If it begins to pour I’ll go in. But right now it is just drizzling. Let me do my seva, child. This is my satguru’s *amrit* (nectar).”

Seva is love. Words cannot describe seva or its effect on us. It is a unique and personal journey for every disciple. To truly understand seva we have to experience it – both the chaos and the joy of it.

THREE

Why Do We Serve?

*santon ki seva jo karoge,
aatm-roop apna jaanoge.*

To discover your own essence –
this is why you serve a master.

BAHINABAI⁵⁴

Baba Ji tells us in his satsangs that when we do anything in life we should know *why* we do it; otherwise it becomes a meaningless ritual. For our seva to have meaning, we begin with a deep reflection on the reasons for doing it. Why does the master look for more and more opportunities to give us seva? And why do we give up precious time from our busy lives to do it?

Why does the master give us seva?

Sometimes seva feels almost contrived. The master appears to create jobs for us to do when there is no apparent need for them. For example, when the satsang hall in the Dera was being constructed in the 1930s, a well-known contractor and devoted disciple from Delhi requested of the Great Master that he be given the seva of constructing the whole building. Great Master replied:

No, I want every satsangi, even the poorest of the poor, to be given an opportunity to offer something in seva, even if it is only a rupee or half a rupee. I would also like every satsangi, rich and poor, young and old, to participate in the construction, even if they carry only a handful of sand or a few bricks. Their smallest effort is precious to me, every drop of perspiration shed by them is valuable. This is seva of love and devotion.⁵⁵

The same was true in Hazur's time. Once Hazur was overseeing some construction seva. A disciple who was with him at the time remarked that now there were bulldozers and sophisticated machines that could bring down a mountain in no time. He told Hazur to just give him the order and he would get those machines to the Dera. Hazur replied that he was aware of such equipment, but he asked, "If we get bulldozers, then how can we engage in seva?" At another time Hazur remarked that he could have most of the kitchen work at the Dera reduced by purchasing mechanical aids, but having it done by hand meant that people were able to do more seva.

Clearly something is going on here. Is this not the exact opposite of how things work in the world, where the efficiency with which a task is done is paramount? Based on these examples, it is clear that the tangible end product – the shed, the building, etc. – is not the thing that matters most to the master. There is something in the doing of it, in the close involvement of every disciple, that he cares about more.

Every satsangi should do some seva.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁵⁶

At our level, we can only speculate on the reasons why the mystics lay so much stress on seva. Saints have referred to

seva as a soap, a powerful cleanser with which they purify us and make us fit to return to the Lord. Jami, a fifteenth-century Sufi mystic, relates a story about the cleansing effect of seva. A young man became the student of a sheikh and was given the job of cleaning toilets. His mother, a wealthy physician, asked the sheikh to give her son some other job and sent the sheikh twelve slaves to clean the outhouses. The sheikh replied, “You are a physician. If your son had an inflammation of the gall bladder, should I give the medicine to a slave instead of giving it to him?”⁵⁷

By serving the master we really serve ourselves, because by so doing each and every part of our body is purified.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁵⁸

We cannot comprehend what the master accomplishes, spiritually, through seva. But even at our present level of understanding, some of the reasons why the master provides seva for us are apparent.

To begin with, despite the scale of the sangat, he has kept alive this dynamic relationship between living master and disciple, and one of the ways he has done it is through seva. Through the establishment of centres around the world, almost every disciple now has the opportunity to do seva and discover a tangible relationship with the master of our time.

The relationship of a master with a disciple is just a personal relationship of the individual. It does not come through society; it does not come through groups; it does not come through organizations. It is a personal contact of a disciple with a master, and nobody comes in the way at all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁵⁹

This relationship is built not only through personal interactions with the master, because not everyone gets an opportunity to meet with him when they do seva. Baba Ji often tells us that to develop any relationship we have to give it two things: our time and our attention. When we do seva, we take the time and attention we would ordinarily have given to the world and we give it to the master instead. So even when he is not physically with us, seva connects us with him, reminds us of him, and keeps us in his spiritual presence. This connection deepens our relationship with him.

If you are feeling him, if you are thinking about him, if your attention is towards him, you are always with him.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶⁰

Soon after a new property was bought overseas for the purpose of holding satsang, sevadars began to build the first structure on it, a simple barn. The foundation had been built and work on the walls had started. Suddenly, early one morning, the master walked in. He looked at the work that had been done and said he would be back in the afternoon to meet with the sevadars. The sevadars worked hard all morning, and by afternoon the walls of the barn were up. They put a tarp up for the roof and set out some chairs. As promised, the master came back and sat with them. No microphone, no speakers, just the master and his sevadars. What a wonderful afternoon that must have been! Seva gives the master the opportunity to get off the stage and walk among us, to get off the pedestal we like to put him on – to simply be at our level. He talks to us, he jokes with us, he challenges us, and he pushes us to our limits. Through such interactions, we build a relationship with him, we learn from him, and our love for him grows.

The master once commented that a particular construction project for a satsang centre was not really needed, because

the sangat could continue to rent a hall. He then explained that they were going ahead with the project anyway because it would provide an opportunity for seva and give the sangat a place where they felt they belonged. He said that seva is there so that we can learn to work with one another. Buildings in themselves have no spiritual value, he said; they simply provide us with opportunities to listen to satsang and work together in love and harmony.

Mystics tell us that we are dyed in the colour of the company we keep. If we keep the company of people who do things that are destructive to themselves and others, we will eventually be influenced to do the same. If, instead, we keep the company of spiritually minded people, we will start thinking like them. In seva we interact with disciples who have the same goals and priorities we have and who love the master as we do. We enjoy the company of our fellow travellers on the path, Hazur says, because we are supporting each other in our common goal:

We always like their company because our object is the same, the pivot is the same, the platform on which we stand is the same. We strengthen each other's faith, each other's love, each other's devotion for the Lord, and our association helps each other to meditate.⁶¹

Seva is one of the many tools the master uses to turn our attention within. If outer seva weaves in and out throughout our day, then, as we go about our chores and errands, it distracts our mind from petty worries, helps us keep our problems in perspective, and keeps the spiritual path front and centre in our life. This makes it easier to turn the mind within during meditation. A sevadar once explained that through seva, the master frees us from a life of self-absorption and delivers us into a life of divine absorption. He absorbs our time, our attention, our thoughts, our efforts, our sweat, our breaths, and soon

we find we are no longer pouring our lives into the world. We are pouring our lives into God. Little by little, he bends our mind Godward.

We live our daily lives in the realm of action. Meditation lives in the realm of stillness. Physical seva acts as a bridge – as a way to prepare the mind for the stillness of meditation. The beauty of physical seva is that much of it takes place in the same context as many of our worldly activities – painting, cooking, cleaning, planting, planning, budgeting, spending, deciding, cooperating, compromising – which creates a natural overlap between our spiritual and worldly lives. This enables the master to start working with us right where we are, so that he can slowly lead us to where he wants us to be. In seva, outwardly the master has us perform familiar worldly activities, while inwardly he is teaching us humanity, morality, humility, selflessness, and constant remembrance of the Lord. Through seva he takes our outward tendencies and actions and spiritualizes them. This is the miracle of the mystics. While engaging us in the most mundane tasks, they teach us the deepest spiritual values and connect us with the highest reality.

The real miracle of the mystics is that our whole outlook on life has changed, from downward and outward to inward and upward. . . . Our concept of life, the whole purpose of our life has changed.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶²

If the practice of meditation makes us better human beings, the practice of physical seva is the field where that humanity is tested. In seva we come across people we find difficult and circumstances we find challenging, and we are given opportunities to grow. We may feel that the practice of meditation fills us with love, but if we retire into solitude and don't engage with

the world, how will we know whether that love is true or just an emotion? Out in the world, that love is tested. Out in the world, as we engage in service, we have an opportunity to practise that love in the form of compassion, kindness, and caring.

Why do we do seva?

Since seva is not compulsory, why do we do it? When we look back at our lives we may find that our reasons for coming to seva initially, then staying with it over the years, have changed and evolved as we have matured.

Can we remember the first day we signed up for seva? Our initial reasons were so simple. Perhaps another sevadar asked if we could help with something, and without thinking too much about it we said, “Yes.” After a couple of times we began to enjoy ourselves and came back for more.

Perhaps we watched some sevadars doing their work and we felt an urge to be a part of it. Maybe we had read in the books that mystics strongly advocate seva, and we believed they would not recommend something unless it had a spiritual benefit. Or maybe we simply felt a strong desire to serve the master in whatever way possible in his service to the sangat.

Our initial reasons for coming to seva may not have been completely selfless. We may have come to seva to socialize or to look for marriage prospects. Or perhaps we hoped it could be a substitute for meditation, as meditation felt like too much work.

We may even have come to seva with a mistaken notion that seva was a utopia, a place where we would find peace and harmony, a place with no conflict. But if we came into seva wearing rose-coloured glasses, we probably discovered very quickly that we had unrealistic expectations. Just like any other place where two or more people gather together and interact, the seva world has its challenges.

No matter what our reasons for coming to seva – no matter how simplistic, wrong-minded, genuine, or self-centred – the master welcomes us without judgement. His love is so magnetic, so generous, it slowly draws us in.

Over time our love for the master deepens. We may now come to seva because we want to give back. The desire to be of help to the master is a huge motivation for seva. The master has such an important mission! We see how single-mindedly he devotes his life to his own seva – fulfilling his master's will. We see how much needs to get done, so we want to reach out and help. As one sevadar puts it: Seva is a great opportunity to put muscle and mind to work for the master – to share his load, to share his burden, to serve him through serving his disciples. Over the years we give more and more of ourselves because we feel needed.

As our love deepens, our reasons for doing seva deepen. We come to seva because it keeps us in his presence. Signing up for seva doesn't necessarily mean that we will see any more of the physical master than others will, but when we do seva we feel the fragrance of his subtle presence. We begin to see that every step we take in seva is a step towards him; every moment we spend in seva is time spent with him. Just the desire to be enveloped by his presence becomes a motivation to do seva.

Somewhere in this continuum of deepening love comes an important realization:

We need seva but seva doesn't need us.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶³

We do seva because *we need it*. We realize that if we were to step down from our seva, many others would step forward to do it. There is a saying in India: *seva karaange te mukdi nahin*,

na karaange te rukdi nahin, meaning: when we do seva, it may feel like there's so much to do, there's no end to it, but if we decide not to do seva, seva doesn't stop; it carries on without us. Great Master would say that if the Lord wants, he can make even stones do his work. This simply means that the master doesn't need our help; he can get the work done by anyone. We do seva for ourselves, because we *need* it. Seva cleans us, softens us, purifies us, and makes us more like the one whom we serve.

Service has many rewards, but the unique one is that a person imbibes the qualities of the person whom he serves.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁶⁴

Seva transforms us. The greatest beneficiary of seva is not the sangat and not the master; it is the sevadar. People come to satsang, listen to the shabds and satsang for an hour or so, feel more peaceful and anchored for the week, and go on their way. But the sevadar who has perhaps spent months reading spiritual books to prepare the satsang is transformed by the process. The sevadar who has spent months practising chanting the shabds, deeply exploring the meaning of each word, is also transformed. And the sevadars who have spent many hours laying out the books, cleaning the hall and toilets, cooking the food, trimming the hedges, painting the boundary wall, and guiding cars into the parking lot are also transformed. This transformation may be subtle and barely discernible from day to day, but we know in our heart that it is happening.

As our discipleship matures, we begin to realize the magnitude of what the master is doing for us. We begin to see his hand in everything, not just in our spiritual work but also in our worldly life. As he reveals his care and protection, we feel

overwhelmed by a desire to thank him in some way. Seva, then, becomes an expression of our heartfelt gratitude.

Meditation fills us with love for the master, for the Lord, for the whole creation. Years and years of meditation slowly unveil who the master really is. As devotion begins to fill us, it overflows as service – the helpless outpouring of love towards the one who has given us everything.

I cannot love God in words only: my heart has to express it, my hands have to express it, my feet have to express it.

MOTHER TERESA⁶⁵

Finally, no matter where we are along the continuum of evolving discipleship, one motivation for doing seva remains constant, and that is the joy of doing seva.

The joy of seva

At one satsang centre there was a shallow waste pit out in the field. Every day, farm waste – the roots of plants, food leftovers, cut grass, and animal waste – were dumped into it. Once, on a cold, rainy day, one of the sevadars accidentally backed a tractor right into the muck pond, all the way up to the top of the motor. This was a problem.

Sevadars stood around and debated solutions. First they tried to push the tractor out, but it couldn't be done. Then someone suggested that a ramp might be a good place to start. Ten sevadars came over and a ramp was built. A chain was brought to pull the tractor out, but the question was how to attach it to the axle buried in the muck? One of the sevadars grabbed the chain and waded into the shallow pool of muck. Groping in the slime, he wrestled the chain over the axle, and another tractor pulled the stuck tractor out. The job was done!

All the wet sevadars jostled and cheered as the tractor, and their friend, emerged from the muck.

This story makes us smile because we often encounter incidents like this. This is an example of the overt delight of doing seva – the laughter, the fun, the camaraderie that at times occurs in seva.

But beyond this, there is a quiet joy of working with one another on simple tasks in service of the master. When these tasks are done with an attitude of obedience and devotion, there comes a sense of pure joy – of oneness, of timelessness, of unity and harmony – that is rarely found in worldly work.

True joy goes beyond occasional happiness and laughter. It is a way of life. It is that state of stability we experience when there is hope and meaning in our life.

Many people have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.

HELLEN KELLER⁶⁶

Seva has the ability to bring us into the moment. Sometimes when we are doing seva, we get so absorbed in the task that we forget ourselves. We forget our physical aches and pains, we forget our worries, we forget how tired we are, we forget how important we think we are, and we experience the delight of simply focusing on the task at hand. This soothes and relaxes us, providing a break from the constant chatter of the mind. We reach a state of contentment and clear thinking.

We also find joy in the company of our fellow sevadars and treasure the experiences we've had over the years with our many brothers and sisters on the path. If not for our seva, how would we have had the chance to spend time with so many beautiful

people in such lofty circumstances and to share so many special moments of love and friendship? Once we taste the sweetness of seva, we keep coming back for more.

Anyone can take from others, but there is no true happiness or peace to be found in taking. As one sevadar put it: There is absolutely no joy in living a self-centred life; but there is so much joy in forgetting oneself, and using this body and mind for something beyond earning money and worldly recognition.

Through selfless service we discover that the joy of giving far exceeds the joy of receiving. Ultimately, this is why we do seva.

There's more happiness in giving than taking, more happiness in donating than accepting any gift, more happiness in helping somebody than getting help from anybody. The pleasure that you get by helping somebody, making somebody happy in life – nothing can compare with that pleasure.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶⁷

FOUR

How Do We Serve?

Whatever we do in his service should be saturated with deep humility, love, and devotion.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶⁸

Once we are committed to doing seva, the paramount question becomes: How should seva be done? The rest of this book is devoted to a deeper exploration of this question. But the short answer is that we try to serve in a way that pleases the master:

Seva is to please another person. If the person whom you are serving is pleased, then your seva is beneficial.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁶⁹

Perhaps it is only after years of doing seva that we learn the most important lesson of all: Seva is not about *what* we do, it is about *how* we do it. Seva is not about this project or that project, this task or that task. In fact, the task doesn't matter. What we offer in seva is not our skills and talent. What we offer is our love. There is a beautiful term in Hindi and Punjabi that captures this concept: *seva bhav*. *Seva bhav* literally means the attitude of love with which we do our seva.

The purpose of all seva is to bend the mind towards God. This is why physical seva is truly seva only when it is infused with the right attitude of mind.

*sa seva keeti safal hai
jit satgur ka man manne.*

Fruitful and rewarding is that service
which is pleasing to the guru's mind.

GURU RAM DAS⁷⁰

And as Great Master wrote in *Philosophy of the Masters*:

A disciple should serve his master without arrogance and without any idea of reward, and always with the aim of pleasing the master. By this method his mind will always be contemplating the master. And if you contemplate on a person intensely, you will one day imbibe the qualities of that person.⁷¹

To learn how to do seva with love, we only have to look to the master. As a sevadar of his own master, he is a living example of how seva is done. The master manifests the qualities of a true sevadar – qualities like responsibility, dedication, self-discipline, obedience, surrender, humility, selflessness, detachment, balance, patience, kindness, inclusiveness and, above all, love.

Although this appears to be a daunting list of virtues, and we are far from perfect, we need not feel disheartened. Even if we are a long way from the ideal, it is still wonderful to have the opportunity to aspire to it. We place that objective before us – to absorb the qualities of a true sevadar – and work to realize them in ourselves.

We learn not just from the master, but from one another. When we come to seva, we often have to unlearn everything

we've learned in our worldly roles, because seva has a different purpose. Here we are not trying to learn skills, but *how to serve one another with love*.

Over the years, we come across many sevadars whose attitude towards seva inspires us – the ones who are willing to take on a responsibility no one else wants; the ones who are invisible, who quietly do their seva rather than pushing themselves forward to impress; the ones who are unfailingly kind to others, even when stressed; the ones who take the smallest suggestion from the master as an order to be obeyed. There is so much we can learn from one another.

As we begin to understand the qualities that make up doing seva with the right attitude of love and service, we realize that this is something we will never be done learning. Each time we peel a layer we find there is more to be discovered – about the master, about seva, and about the inner journey. There is infinite scope to improve our approach to seva; there are infinite ways to grow in our love. It is the work of a lifetime.

*Serving with
Body and Mind*

*bhakti daan mohe deejie,
guru devan ke dev;
aur nahi kachhu chaahiye,
nisu din teri sev.*

Give me the gift
of devotion and love,
O master, Lord of all gods;
Nothing else do I ask
but to serve you every day.

KABIR⁷²

FIVE

Dedication

*bahut janam bichhure the maadhau,
eh janam tumhaare lekhe.*

For numerous lifetimes
have I remained separated
from you, O Lord –
This life I dedicate to you.

RAVIDAS⁷³

A head sevadar once spoke fondly about an eighty-five-year-old man who regularly did seva at their site. He would greet everyone with a smile and ask without words: What can I do? He didn't know English, the local language. He didn't have any technical skills. Yet, for some reason, everyone was happy when he came. If he was asked to sweep or dig he would gladly do it. If he was asked to scrape the tile adhesive off a large expanse of concrete flooring, and the task was demonstrated for him, he would smile, nod, and get to work. And he would keep at it continuously.

By afternoon, one was likely to find him working alone in a corner. Some would have left, some would have found more interesting work, and some would be talking about mysticism. He was practising it. At the end of the day he would place the

scraper on the tool table, clean up, give a touching smile filled with gratitude, and leave quietly. This simple man embodies the ideal of dedicated seva.

Once, after the New Delhi satsang programme in 1965, Hazur Maharaj Ji was supposed to give initiation at the Pusa Road centre. He had a very bad cough and cold and could hardly talk. The secretary of the centre urged him many times to postpone the initiation programme. Maharaj Ji simply replied, “This seva is for Hazur (Great Master) and one should not give any slackness to the mind,” and he continued with his programme of initiation. A sevadar who observed this exchange recounted that he was wonderstruck by the master’s answer. Watching Maharaj Ji do his seva with such dedication, in spite of the fact that he was weak and could barely speak, made a lasting impression on his mind. The sevadar said that after that incident he was inspired to do his own seva with complete dedication, never giving into any mental slackness.

In a letter to a friend, Hazur once wrote:

I do not want to fail in my duty, nor do I want to be short in the expectations of my beloved master. I have given to the people all I have. What I could not give, I just did not have.⁷⁴

There are similar stories from the lives of every master – stories of unflinching sacrifice and service to the sangat. When we witness their single-minded dedication we feel inspired to serve in the same way.

Often we find that sevadars need just a word that something needs to be done and they go out and do it. Hazur once related an anecdote from the days when the Beas hospital was under construction:

When the ground for the hospital was acquired, I was told that there were too many trees on the site and that they were very difficult to remove. So I went to the site and I just asked them to remove a few.

Then I went to Sikanderpur. On my return, I found that about a hundred tractors and trailers had been brought in by the sangat (from their farms), and there were about a thousand satsangis digging up the trees by the roots and loading them onto trailers, taking the wood to the langar. . . . That is seva.⁷⁵

In *Legacy of Love*, a head sevadar recounts his memories of the tireless seva done by sevadars during the construction of the hospital:

The dedication of the sevadars to seva, their desire to accomplish the maximum in the minimum possible time, is unbelievable. During the time we were still digging the foundations the sevadars approached the master and said, “Maharaj Ji, please ask the engineers to put lights on the spot where we are digging.” When asked why they needed the lights, they submitted, “Hazur, we are hardly able to do much during the day’s work and so much still has to be done. We want to work for a few hours during the night also.” And when the master declined their request with a loving smile, their faces reflected their disappointment. . . .

They will not stop for rest, they take the minimum time off for lunch, and I wonder if they ever feel tired. One day, seeing an old sevadar well over sixty working without a stop, I went up to him and said, “My good friend, please take a few minutes’ rest – I’ve seen you working for the last few hours without a break, not even to gain your breath. You must be feeling tired.”

“Tired?” he repeated in a hurt voice. “I’m not tired. If you could give me seva for the next twelve hours, I would be grateful and happy to do it.” And turning away, he was again engrossed in his task.⁷⁶

During an evening meeting with foreigners, a woman told Baba Ji that she had observed sevadars often staying up late, working in difficult conditions, and experiencing discomfort. She asked if the master would agree that a certain degree of discomfort was an intrinsic part of seva. The master replied that no, it was not. He said he didn’t think the sevadars would agree either. They would say, “What discomfort?” And he added that if anyone should try to remove that seva and its discomforts from them, they would refuse. He gave the example of the sevadars who cooked chapatis in the langar in the month of June. They stayed up until late at night, working long hours in intensely hot conditions. But, he said, when he went for a round of the Dera at 2:00 or 3:00 a.m. they were all sitting in meditation. He didn’t think they recognized the discomfort.

The sevadar from the hospital construction recounts having the same experience:

In all these months, never have I seen the sevadars complaining about the hardships of life at the construction site, made all the more difficult by the inclemencies of the weather. During the last sixteen months they have faced rain and storm, hail and frost, and the hot summer winds. They have lived in tents, under freshly laid damp roofs, under awnings, on the rough floors of the unfinished corridors. They have often been drenched by icy showers in winter and baked by the blazing sun and the hot winds in the tropical summer. But nothing can shake them from their rock-like dedication to seva.⁷⁷

Where does this rock-like dedication for seva come from? Perhaps it is the Lord's grace. Or it could be the example the master sets of tireless enthusiasm for his own seva. Or maybe our love for the master fuels our love for seva. Hazur used to say: "*Jo bahut pyaar karta hai woh bahut kaam karta hai,*" meaning: The one who loves a lot works a lot.

The hospital sevadar also concludes that only love could fuel such boundless zeal for seva:

Curious passers-by at the site sometimes wonder at the power that makes the sevadars move with such energy and speed. At times I too feel amazed, only to remember the next moment that the sevadars derive energy from their devotion for the master – inspired by his omnipresent grace and love. . . .

Does a mother feel tired or complain when she keeps a day-and-night vigil over her sick child? Does a lover grudge to do the bidding of the beloved, however hard it may be? I have heard old satsangis say that if a disciple does seva with a spirit of surrender, if his approach is that of love and devotion, and he has only one desire in his heart – the desire to please his master – he will not feel tired. And is the master not serving his disciples with the same spirit of love: never stopping, never complaining, ever vigilant, accepting all the toil and hardships of the arduous task of looking after his flock of sheep with unflinching concern, with an ever-loving kind smile?⁷⁸

We see examples of such zeal in the worldly sphere as well. Musicians, artists, surgeons, entrepreneurs, and so many others who put in endless hours of work pursuing their passion don't tire easily because they love what they do. It is when there is no love that the task feels like a chore.

When we read stories of such untiring seva, we may feel that we are lacking in comparison. But we need never feel disheartened. All efforts are equally appreciated by the master and we are all learning as we travel on our journey of seva. Besides, physical seva is not the only way to express our love. If we are unable to do physical seva, the same attitude of dedication can be applied to seva of the mind and to our meditation seva, and that will serve us completely. It is the attitude of giving that matters.

There is an interesting story about giving wholeheartedly. Once a wealthy man tossed a penny at a rabbi, who was collecting money to help the needy. The rabbi quietly picked up the penny and thanked him. The rabbi's assistant asked, "How can you be so kind to such an arrogant person?"

He answered, "That man has never given even a penny in charity before now. I must encourage him, even if he only gives a little. Over time he may learn to be more generous and charitable."

And so it happened. Each time the man gave a little bit more. And each time he was praised and thanked.

On his fourth visit, the wealthy man burst into tears, and to everyone's surprise he gave a large sum of money. The rabbi was about to thank him but the man shook his head and said, "You deserve my praise and thanks because you kept believing in me. You have taught me how to be generous and helpful to others."

While this is a story about serving with one's wealth, it applies equally to seva with body, mind, and soul. Even when we give very little of ourselves, the master accepts our offering without judgement; his love is unconditional. Slowly we learn how to give wholeheartedly.

aisi sevak seva karai.

jis ka jeeò tis aagai dharai.

Such is the service
 which the Lord's servant performs,
 That he dedicates his soul to the Lord,
 to whom it belongs.

GURU NANAK DEV⁷⁹

One aspect of dedicated seva is the ability to persevere in the face of challenges. At one seva site, a dozen sevadars started work to build a satsang hall. Most of the sevadars had never done any construction work. By 10:00 a.m. the temperature hit 43 degrees Celsius (110 degrees Fahrenheit). Everyone was sweating and straining in the attempt to build the first small metal-framed wall.

They took measurements and built the frame, but then realized it was in the wrong location by a few inches, so they tore it down. They built it again using another measuring technique, then tore it down again. The next time they used a surveying tool, but again they misjudged the plan and the frame was in the wrong location. They tore it down again. They couldn't decide how to proceed. The different team leaders had different ideas. Over and over they built that wall and tore it down again. Nothing was getting done, and it was the first wall of the whole project! However, they persevered and a few months later, the entire complex had been built. By the end of it, those inexperienced but loving sevadars had built a hall better than most commercial buildings.

*aagai peechhai sangi rahai,
 aap uthaaye bhaar.*

He is always with me,
 and he himself carries my burden.

DADU DAYAL⁸⁰

We find that when we persevere, there *will* be a breakthrough. A sevadar recalls that when land was purchased for a large centre, their first seva was to stabilize a hillside. Sevadars worked all day to plant thousands of tree saplings. At the end of the day they used little cups to water each sapling. It was a very hot day and they worked from sunrise to sunset. At the end of the day they looked up at the hillside and were very pleased with what they'd accomplished. But that night it rained. It was probably the hardest rain in the history of that region and it washed every single sapling away. The sevadars woke up in the morning to find all the saplings drowned at the bottom of the hill in one big puddle. Undeterred, they cheerfully spent the next day replanting the saplings all over again.

These are examples of perseverance in the face of physical challenges, but we often face emotional challenges in seva as well. There may be times when our fellow sevadars test our patience. There may be times when we feel hurt. There may be times when we just want to give up. It takes dedication and perseverance not to give up, not to lose patience, not to walk away when the going gets tough.

If one has given his heart away, he has virtually given everything. His body, his life, and everything else is dedicated to the object of his love.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁸¹

One aspect of dedicated service is a 'can-do' attitude. The story of how a satsang programme was organized in Agra showcases this mindset.

In May 2011, a small team of sevadars in Delhi was told of Baba Ji's decision to hold a full-scale satsang in Agra, the birthplace of Soami Ji Maharaj, on January 25 and 26, 2012. The team could have hesitated and stated the obvious: there was no

way such a feat could be accomplished because the proposed event was less than nine months away. It would draw anywhere from 200,000 to 400,000 disciples – it was impossible to know exactly how many. There was also no venue in Agra large enough to accommodate so many people, and there were far too few sevadars in Agra to manage such a large event. But this team of sevadars had a belief that nothing was impossible. If the master wanted it done, they would find a way to do it.

The first task was to locate a venue that was over 300 acres in size. After many visits to the area, a suitable location was found just outside Agra. The problem was that only 120 acres of this land belonged to a local builder. The rest of it would have to be leased from numerous local farmers whose farms adjoined the builder's land. Some of the farmers had already sown mustard crops, for which they would need to be compensated. And all of them were resistant to the idea of leasing their land because of the prevailing fear of land-grabbing. But after much convincing they finally agreed and the work of drawing up the plans began.

Extremely detailed drawings needed to be made of all the farms because once the land was levelled for satsang, all the boundaries between them would disappear. Yet, after the programme finished, each farmer would have to be given back his small, irregularly shaped piece of land, not an inch more, not an inch less.

Once the drawings were complete, sevadars began the massive task of preparing the land. The farms not only had different shapes, they were also at different levels, with a difference of twelve feet between the lowest and highest field. The farms that did not have crops were filled with rocks, boulders, shrubs, and trees. About 320 acres of uneven, irregular land had to be cleared and levelled.

Graders, compactors, tractors, and dump trucks were brought in. Between 750 and 1,000 sevadars worked the land

daily. Full of enthusiasm, sevadars poured in from neighbouring states in buses chartered at their own expense, and they worked in shifts of four to ten days. Since the land was in a remote location with no facilities in place, temporary lighting, sanitation, water, medical, food, and accommodation facilities needed to be set up for these sevadars. The team leaders said that at no point did the enthusiasm of the sevadars wane, and not once did they complain that the temporary arrangements made for them were inadequate.

They started work in the blazing summer and continued through a humid monsoon. It was a bitterly cold December when they finally finished the task of clearing and levelling the land. Almost eight months had elapsed. The satsang programme was the following month and there was still nothing but a levelled site.

Then it began to rain. The rain was so heavy it created a huge problem of waterlogging. Disheartened and shivering with cold in the bitter winter, sevadars wondered how they would ever finish the massive task that still lay ahead. Huge pumps were brought in to pump water out of the potholes and ditches. Finally the rain stopped, the land dried, and the work of preparing the venue for satsang began.

A massive open-sided tent was erected that could accommodate as many as 400,000 people if necessary; 800 shower stalls and 2,200 toilets were built; a langar shed and four canteens went up; accommodation facilities were prepared for up to 160,000 people; diesel generators were set up to provide electricity for the entire venue; twenty-four septic tanks and two large water tanks were installed. Ten huge parking lots were demarcated and surfaced for heavy vehicles, buses, cars, and two-wheelers.

Four days before the event, over 22,000 sevadars arrived at the venue to prepare for the arrival of the sangat. Along with them, over 200 trucks poured in from centres in neighbouring

states carrying tent equipment, projectors, TV sets, sound equipment, speakers, utensils, and food supplies. Traffic sevadars were stationed along all the national highways leading from major cities to Agra. Signboards were placed on the highways. Sevadars were deployed at all the toll booths. Highway patrol seva teams on bikes and SUVs were mobilized to ensure smooth and speedy movement of traffic. Temporary accommodations and kitchens were set up for the traffic sevadars at their posts along the highways.

Miraculously, everything was ready on time. And then the sangat began to come! Many of them came by train; 650 shuttle buses were deployed to ferry them between the train stations and the venue. Over 2,000 buses and 9,000 cars brought the sangat from neighbouring states. More than 10,000 two- and three-wheeled vehicles brought some of the local sangat. All cars and buses were labelled and colour-coded to help the sangat find their vehicles in the large parking lots after satsang had finished. Traffic sevadars stood on the roads for hours amidst the noise, dust, and fumes, guiding the sangat into and out of the venue. They worked closely with the local police, who were amazed by the massive mobilization. None of these sevadars got the opportunity to see the master or hear the satsangs.

A total of 250,000 people attended the satsang programme on the first day and 300,000 on the second. Usher sevadars greeted them with welcoming smiles, guided them to their seats, and answered their questions. The free langar served food to 168,000 people, and the canteens and langar functioned round the clock to serve the sangat. Cleaning sevadars, too, worked non-stop keeping the toilets and the entire venue clean.

Then when the programme finished, sevadars had the massive task of dismantling everything and clearing up the venue. The builder and local farmers got their land back in the same shape and size as before. Those who had given uneven land full

of rocks and brambles were filled with gratitude because they got it back leveled, cleared, and ready to farm.

Hazur Maharaj Ji had given satsang in Agra in 1978. This was only the second time that a Beas master was giving satsang in the place we all associate with the beginnings of Radha Soami Satsang. For the sangat it was a moving, momentous occasion.

What started it all? The master set an almost insurmountable challenge, and the sevadars who were given the job didn't say, "That's impossible!" Instead, they said, "It will be done." And they didn't just accomplish a task of breathtaking scale; they did it with dedication, perseverance, and love.

Yet when these sevadars were asked about their amazing attitude, they replied with comments such as: "There is no such thing as back-breaking seva; it is simply seva. There is no such thing as easy or difficult seva; it is simply seva. There is no such thing as can-do or can't-do in seva; a sevadar does not give himself that kind of importance. It is the Lord who does the seva through his sevadars. Seva is a gift from the Lord, and it is only through the Lord's grace that we sevadars can perform our seva."

Sevadars like these inspire us to see beyond 'duty' and 'effort,' because they find so much joy in seva. Seva is our labour of love. When we dedicate ourselves to a life of service, it gives us a goal beyond our small self; it gives purpose and meaning to our life. Over time we realize that seva is one place where work is truly worship – when we care about what we are doing and do it with dedication and love, that service is nothing less than worship.

SIX

Responsibility

The work is God's work and not our work, that is why we must do it well.

MOTHER TERESA⁸²

Once, a group of elderly satsangis visiting another country decided to attend the local satsang. A sevadar from that centre was given the seva of picking them up and bringing them to the centre. He arrived at their place earlier than the arranged pick-up time. "I didn't want to be late for my seva," he told them with a smile. Later they found out that he was always early for seva. After taking this group of satsangis to the satsang, he moved on to help another sevadar with a different task, but he kept a constant eye on the guests. When one of them needed water, there he was with a glass of water in hand. When another gentleman was looking for a pen, in a flash he went off and came back with a pen. The visiting satsangis recall being struck by his attitude, particularly because he was only twenty-two years old.

This is a simple example of responsible seva. As responsible sevadars, we show up for seva on time. When we take on a task, we try to complete it in a timely way and to the best of our ability. If a task is getting delayed, we let others know in time. And if we make a mistake, or if there is a problem, we don't conceal it.

We try to do our seva in a responsible way because the master has entrusted us with it, and other people are depending on us to do it well. And we also do it for ourselves – because we care about our seva.

A responsible sevadar doesn't need to be constantly checked on to ensure that a task is finished on time and in the proper way. This is the sevadar that team leaders long to have on their teams, because they know that once this person is given a task, they won't have to worry about it getting done. This is the sevadar people turn to when they are in a bind and need some help, no questions asked. There is an apt saying: When you have an important job, give it to the busiest person and it will get done. The responsible sevadar is that person.

We don't have to be in a position of responsibility to take responsibility or to make a difference. Sometimes when we are assigned to a seva task that requires no special skills or experience, we may mistakenly think it has no value. We may think: How important can it be to trim a hedge to perfection, or clean a store room until it shines, or pick up fallen leaves until not one remains? But in seva, *everything* we do has value. Every little detail, every effort of every sevadar, contributes to making our centres and the Dera the uniquely clean, welcoming, spiritual havens they are.

Making mistakes

Being responsible and trying to do our seva as perfectly as possible doesn't mean that we will never make mistakes. For many of us, nothing in our life experience has prepared us for some of the responsibilities we're given in seva. A construction worker may be tasked with tending a vegetable garden; a shy computer programmer may become the sangat secretary; and a person who has never been exposed to anything financial may end up in the accounting department, writing cheques and balancing

books. We face learning challenges and people-related issues. There is no road map to follow, no training school where we can learn the job. Of course we make mistakes – we are not perfect.

There is an old story about the cracked clay pot. A pot that had a crack in it was always half-empty by the time the water-bearer carried it back home from the river. Ashamed of her weakness, the pot apologized to him. But the water-bearer smiled and responded, “Look at all the beautiful flowers that line the pathway, because you watered them every step of the way, every day!” So we are all a bunch of cracked pots, and it doesn’t matter – we can all bring something of value to seva anyway.

It is said that in Rumi’s time, a local government official once commented that Rumi was “a king without equal” but that his disciples were “extremely bad and meddlesome people.” Word got back to Rumi’s disciples and they became dejected. Rumi wrote to the government official:

If my disciples were good people, I would myself have become their disciple. It is because they were bad people that I accepted them as disciples, so that they might undergo change and become good, and enter the corps of those who are good and do good works.

I’m not blind but I possess the philosopher’s stone. That’s why I buy these counterfeit dirhams.⁸³

The master doesn’t judge us. He tells us that each one of us has strengths and weaknesses, and we bring them with us into seva. He says we should understand what our strengths are and then build on them. How wonderful that the master doesn’t focus on our weaknesses or allow us to do so either. He looks at our attitude and effort and sees our unique potential. And he gives us opportunity after opportunity to overcome our weaknesses, in the safe environment of seva. The master often

says that seva is a learning process. So even when we fail here or there, we cannot actually fail at seva itself. What a relief it is to know that if we give our time, do our best, and have the right attitude, we are pleasing him.

Mistakes are part of life. If people make no mistakes, they are probably not doing much at all; only a person who is trying will make mistakes. And mistakes are not a bad thing if we learn from them – not just what went wrong but how to do something better the next time.

At times, in spite of our best efforts, the end result may not turn out as perfect as intended because we've made some mistakes along the way. And that is okay, because the master is more interested in the attitude and love that we put into our seva.

What matters most is whether we approached the task with our best effort and tried sincerely to work in harmony with our fellow sevadars. If we did so, the master will always be pleased with our effort. Ultimately, it is our inner self, not our physical seva task, that is being moved towards perfection.

Being willing to apologize

When we make a mistake, we should simply take responsibility for our action and apologize for it. When we don't admit to a mistake and try to cover up the mistake, the cover-up is usually worse than the original error. We may feel guilty and be constantly worried that the mistake will be discovered.

Why get embroiled in all this just to appear infallible to the sangat and other sevadars? Why spoil our relationships with fellow sevadars and lose our peace of mind? It is much easier to simply accept that we've made a mistake. It is to our benefit if we are not afraid to admit that we don't know everything or that we've done something wrong. Why be afraid to say "I'm sorry?" When we apologize, we begin the process of fixing the problem.

Sometimes the higher our seva position is, the more unwilling we may be to take responsibility for our mistakes. Maybe we feel that other sevadars will lose respect for us, or worse, lose faith in our leadership. Quite the opposite: others are likely to respect us more for having the humility to apologize. And our humility and willingness to take responsibility will set a good example for other sevadars and will please the master.

Taking ownership – doing more

A king had a large boulder placed in the middle of a roadway. Then he hid himself and watched to see if anyone would remove it. Some of the kingdom's wealthiest merchants and courtiers came by and simply walked around it. Some loudly blamed the king for not keeping the roads clear. But no one did anything about getting the boulder out of the way. Then a peasant carrying a load of vegetables came along. When he saw the boulder, he realized it could cause an accident. The peasant lay down his burden and tried to move the boulder to the side of the road. After much pushing and straining, he finally succeeded. To his surprise, he found a purse lying on the road where the boulder had been. The purse contained many gold coins and a note from the king saying that the gold was for the person who removed the boulder from the road.

When the peasant moved the boulder off the road, he didn't know there would be a purse of gold coins beneath it. His was an act of selfless service. In our seva, too, we come across such boulders – things that are going wrong, things that could hurt someone, things that could cause a loss. Do we take the initiative to move the boulder or bring it to the attention of the right person?

A young man who was not a sevadar once came to a sat-sang centre to meet his mother who was doing seva there. As he walked through the centre, he noticed a dirty stray dog sleeping in front of the cafeteria door. Disturbed at this, he

went and found a sevadar from that department and told him it was unhygienic to have a stray dog near a place where food was being cooked and served. The sevadar replied, “That’s not my job. My job is to sell food coupons, and I’m doing that.” So the young man sought out the person in charge and related the incident to him. “Well, son,” was the response, “this is why we need people like you to join seva.” So he did!

As responsible sevadars we can keep asking ourselves: What can I do to make my seva better? It is so valuable to be open to continuous improvement. There is always something more that can be done to improve things – the same seva can be done in a more efficient way, or someone may have a new idea about how to serve the sangat better. But when we go out of our way to help someone or to improve something, it’s good to check in with ourselves first to make sure that our intentions are positive – that we are motivated by a desire to do what is in the best interest of the sangat and not by a desire to interfere with the work of another sevadar or department. There are times when it is best to do only what we are asked to do, and there are times when it is important to do something more to help. We can use our judgement to do what we think would best please the master.

And whenever we have a good idea or offer suggestions for improvement, we can do so with an open mind and a willingness to accept the final decision by the head sevadar. Sometimes our ideas and suggestions will be accepted; sometimes they will not.

As Hazur once put it so beautifully:

Who’s the host and who’s the guest? I don’t know. Satsangis are the host, satsangis are the guest. They come, they cook, they eat and they go – I don’t know whom to thank. . . . They think I do it, I think they do it. I’m grateful to them; they come and thank me.⁸⁴

Being the master's ambassadors

Hazur used to say that the saints' biography lies in their disciples and in their teachings reflected through their disciples.⁸⁵ Sevadars are keenly aware that their actions reflect on their beloved master.

Within the organization, the sangat often sees sevadars as role models. And in the outside community, sevadars tend to be at the front lines of the organization, working with local officials. Sevadars are the master's ambassadors – they represent him and all that he stands for.

At a school in a large city in India, sevadars from a nearby satsang centre were waiting outside the principal's office. Their sangat had grown a lot and they wanted to divide the present centre into two separate ones. For this they needed to rent a large hall at a school. When they were ushered into the principal's office, they noticed that principals from several other schools were present in the room. The principal apologized for keeping them waiting, explaining that since his meeting with the other principals would take a while to complete, he had decided to take a break to find out what the sevadars wanted.

The sevadars made their request to rent the school hall. When one of the guest principals heard their request, he urged the principal to accept their petition, saying that he had rented his school hall to RSSB and had never regretted it – they took great care of the property and were prompt in their payments. Then another principal said the same thing. Then another! All told, three principals in the room were renting out their school halls to the organization and had nothing but good things to say. Reassured by their feedback, the principal agreed to rent out his school hall as well. The sevadars left the meeting stunned by the grace – the timing of their meeting had turned out to be quite a 'lucky' coincidence, and they were thankful for the foundation laid by sevadars from other centres. Because of

the reputation created by those sevadars, their own task had become so easy.

It is sevadars' patience in the face of opposition, and their integrity and sense of responsibility, that has built the reputation of the organization.

Making it enjoyable

Being responsible sevadars doesn't mean we have to be serious all the time. Seva is best when it is fun and we come away from it feeling joyful. Often it's enough just to smile, as a smile is contagious – it lights up a room, makes sevadars feel welcome, and lightens bad moods.

A sevadar relates that during a visit to the Dera, there was a fire in one of the stacks of fuel in the langar. She joined the dozens of people passing buckets of water to put out the fire. Suddenly Baba Ji arrived, stood on top of one of the stacks and began to direct the activity. The fire was easily controlled. Lots of people slowed down or stopped and focused on him. This sevadar recalls feeling irritated at the time, thinking that they had this task to do – to finish putting out the fire – but people were not focusing on it. That evening someone asked the master about the fire and he just laughed and said something like, “It was just an opportunity to do some seva and have some fun!”

The sevadar realized then that her narrow focus on the task alone diminished her experience. She had lost the opportunity to absorb and enjoy his presence. It was important to put out the fire, yes, but once the danger had passed and the fire had been put out, it was also an opportunity to spend time with the master, and the sevadars were enjoying that.

We should be serious about following Sant Mat, but that doesn't mean that we should disregard the cheerful side

of life altogether. Rather, we should feel more relaxed because we are following the path.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁸⁶

How can people not be joyful when they are doing seva? They feel close to the master and close to their brothers and sisters on the path, and that joy naturally bubbles over.

The master himself sets the tone on this. When it's time to be serious he is serious. But when it's not, he initiates the fun and games and even plays pranks. And sometimes, when he wants to teach us a lesson, he uses humour to do it. We can learn from him to relax in seva. We can be responsible and at the same time enjoy our seva.

You see, except for humans, nobody laughs. I don't think you have seen any bird laughing or any dog laughing or any animal laughing. They may smile, but the privilege of laughter is given only to humans. So if we want to remain human, humour has to be there, just to help us relax.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁸⁷

There is a key difference between being responsible and 'carrying the burden of responsibility.' Being responsible is a frame of mind that helps us do our seva to the best of our ability. But if we carry the *burden* of responsibility, it can take the joy out of seva. It is a burden we don't need to carry; the master will carry it if we just let him. Even if it is our seva to ensure that 200,000 people are fed during a satsang weekend, all we can do is be responsible and put in our best effort. Beyond that, if we surrender to the master and function as his agent, we will discover that he is already carrying the responsibility on his shoulders.

If you really surrender everything to the Lord, then you have no responsibility, whatever you may do.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁸⁸

Doing it for ourselves

There is a story about a king who asked his prime minister to build him a beautiful palace. The king told the prime minister to design it as he wished and to spend as much money on it as he desired. The prime minister built the palace. When it was done, it looked beautiful from the outside, but in places where it wouldn't show he had cut corners, thinking that no one would notice. When the palace was ready, the king walked around and admired it. Then he told the prime minister, "This palace is not for me. I had it built for you, as a reward for all your years of service. This is my gift to you."

The prime minister was thankful to the king, but the gift was bittersweet. In his heart he lamented, "Alas! If only I had known this gift was for me! I would have put my heart and soul into it and done it much better."

The king didn't need the palace; it was always intended to be a gift. In the same way, the master doesn't need our seva. Seva, in all its forms, is his gift to us. When we don't realize this, when we think we are doing the seva for someone else – for the sangat or the sevadar-in-charge – we may be tempted to do it half-heartedly. But when we realize we are doing seva primarily for ourselves, when we realize that with our seva we are building our own spiritual treasure, we cannot but do it with our whole heart.

SEVEN

Self-Discipline

Although it is our bodies that make us human, it is our conduct that should exemplify the glory of humanity.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH⁸⁹

*A*n intriguing aspect of this path is that although the goal is lofty and much is required of us, discipline is never externally imposed. The master never demands that we do anything – we don't have to leave our homes and live in a commune, we don't have to wear uniform clothing, and satsang and seva are voluntary. Even the do's and don'ts of the four vows are not enforced by anyone externally. The onus is on us. This is a path of self-discipline.

Self-discipline on the path means we are trying to align our mind with the Lord's will. To this end, self-discipline includes the determination to overcome the resistance of the mind – which may manifest as laziness or fear. It includes the self-awareness to recognize bad habits and the resolve to replace them with good ones. Self-discipline includes the ability to say 'no' to temptations and distractions. It includes the self-control needed to refuse immediate gratification and, instead, to put in the time and effort needed to achieve the ultimate goal.

Someone once asked Hazur, “How is discipline connected with love, and what is the difference between discipline and love?” He answered:

Well, sister, to remain in the father’s love actually is to remain in his discipline. . . . Anything which takes us away from his love makes us undisciplined, so whatever keeps us within his love, within his devotion, that is a discipline for us that we have to follow.⁹⁰

Self-discipline is a core element of seva

Sometimes we may be tempted to drop our seva or to do a half-hearted job because we think it’s not interesting enough, or not important enough, or it involves too much effort, or because our friends are doing seva elsewhere. But if we leave our seva when it doesn’t suit us, how would the seva get done? And how would we please the master?

In Great Master’s time, a sevadar was assigned the job of serving water to the sangat. One day while he was doing his seva, he saw Great Master approaching in his car. Excited, he left the person to whom he was serving the water, left his post at the water-point, and ran forward to the edge of the road to see the master up close. Great Master noticed the sevadar leave his seva and run towards him. He commented to the person sitting next to him, “*Lai! Rupaiya chhad ke chavanni lain aaya hai,*” meaning: “See, he abandoned a rupee and has come to collect a quarter of one.”

What did Great Master mean? He was not implying by this statement that the value of seva is greater than the value of physical darshan, but that if we abandon our seva to follow the master we lose more than we gain.

During one of Baba Ji’s visits, sevadars were told that if he walked near them, they should continue with their seva in a natural way – not to stop their work to stare at him or follow

him around. Some sevadars were working on a well in a field far away. They knew the chances of him coming so far out were non-existent, but they didn't abandon their seva to go looking for him. And, of course, what happened? The master spotted them and walked all the way over to the well to talk to them. The master loves his sevadars. We don't have to go looking for him. If we are disciplined and obedient, he will find us.

If the student is very obedient in the class, and very disciplined, the professor is always anxious to help him, with one excuse or another.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁹¹

Once at a satsang centre, sevadars were busy preparing for the arrival of the sangat – sweeping, cleaning, cooking. Suddenly, Baba Ji arrived. The sevadars were thrilled to see him, but they quietly continued to do their seva. The master was able to walk freely through the centre and inspect different seva projects under way. Impressed by their restraint, Baba Ji said to the sevadar with him: “With discipline like this, I would come every day.”

Just before he got into his car to leave, the sevadar asked if he would like to eat something. As if on impulse, Baba Ji said he wouldn't mind a cup of tea. As it turned out, it was time for the sevadars' tea break. At tea, sevadars who had just seen the master were recounting the story of his surprise visit to friends who hadn't had the chance to see him. To everyone's surprise, the master walked in again! He stood in line to get his tea, chatted with the sevadars, then gave a brief impromptu satsang. One of the things he said once again was: “With discipline like this, I would come every day.”

Why did the master make such a statement? Perhaps because we sevadars are not always disciplined. When we are in the

master's presence, why do we sometimes behave in ways that are inappropriate? There are several possible reasons.

Perhaps our behaviour stems from the mind's age-old focus on all that is external. Many of us have come to this path from a religious background, where we may have learned to focus our devotion on physical objects. This habit has become so ingrained that we bring the same approach into Sant Mat. Hazur had to seal off the well built by Great Master because the sangat started to ritualize it. And Baba Ji has sealed off the *satsang ghar*, the old satsang hall in the Dera, because some people started revering it and referring to it as Sach Khand. Baba Ji often asks that if he were to place Hazur's shoes on a pedestal today, which one of us would not bow before them? Our master is pointing to the eye centre, urging us to go within. But we don't look to where he is pointing; we are too busy worshipping the finger he is pointing with.

A second reason for our lack of discipline in the master's presence could be a misunderstanding about what darshan is and what we think we can gain from it. Some of us believe that the more darshan we have of the physical master, the more of our karmas will be cleansed. Intent on this misguided notion of reducing our karmic burden, we try to see him wherever he may go. And in doing so, we might be oblivious to the impact of our behaviour on the master. Hazur once said, "I cannot go out. I cannot walk on the roads in the colony, I can't do anything."⁹² But surely love doesn't imprison the beloved!

If everybody starts running after the master, where will master hide? Where will he go? We have to remain in discipline. This outside running doesn't lead us anywhere at all. . . . Running after him is not loving the master at all. We can't control our emotions and we try to copy each other.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁹³

The master is telling us that there's a herd mentality at play here. We are simply copying each other. When we see other people running after him we start running, too, hoping to catch his eye, worried that we may miss something. We are following the dictates of our mind; we follow everyone and everything – except the teachings.

Sometimes even sevadars may get carried away. We too may ignore requests from sevadars; we too may push and jostle to be able to sit as far in the front as possible. Mystics tell us such behaviour does not befit a disciple:

Proper conduct is that a person who enters the saint's assembly should sit down in whatever empty place he spies. It is not fitting, at the moment that one comes to visit the *pir*,* to be thinking: 'Whom should I sit ahead of or behind?' Wherever a person sees an opening he should sit down, since every visitor is on the same footing.

SHEIKH NIZAMUDDIN⁹⁴

It is vitally important to understand the true meaning of darshan. Baba Ji tells us that we cannot *do* darshan; at this stage we only look at the master. True darshan is the fruit of true love; it is the helplessness of the disciple to look at the master. In true darshan there is no calculation about how near or far away we are from his physical form.

Darshan means the helplessness of the lover to look at the beloved. It is the pull which is within every one of us. That is darshan. Whether you are sitting near or whether you are sitting far away, it comes to the same thing.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁹⁵

* *Pir*: A Sufi master or spiritual guide.

The master frequently asks if the master is giving us darshan or if we are giving him our darshan. He says that if the master is giving us darshan, then he gives the same darshan to the person sitting in the front and the person sitting at the back. But if we are pushing our way forward, maybe we are trying to give him our darshan – trying to be sure he sees us.

He also reminds us that if the master doesn't want to give darshan to someone, then even if that person is right in front of him, he will not receive anything. But if the master wants to give darshan to someone, even if that person is seven oceans away, he will receive it.

Hazur used to say that if physical proximity to the master or frequency of darshan were determinants of spiritual progress, then wouldn't members of the master's family and residents of the Dera have reached Sach Khand by now? Yet they struggle with the mind just like the rest of us. The point is that we cannot grab darshan; we cannot take his darshan. Darshan is his gift, which he gives to whom he wills, when he wills.

Master is within every disciple – whether they are five or whether they are five million. Everybody's master is with him.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH⁹⁶

Once a young woman went to Beas to get initiated. The day after initiation, she happened to visit a resident of the Dera. When this old satsangi heard that she had just been initiated, he was delighted. "So, dear daughter," he said. "What did you do today?" The young girl happily informed him that she had waited on the roads throughout the day and received master's darshan five times! When the elderly disciple heard this, he explained gently: "This is not darshan. Running after the master like this is like running around with a camera and clicking the

same photograph over and over again, but never developing it. You have to take the photograph just once, then take your camera to a darkroom and process the film. Once it's developed, you can look at that picture whenever you choose."

This is such beautiful advice. There is a vital distinction between darshan and running after the master. Darshan is when the master *chooses* to give of his grace – when he is on stage during satsang, or when we are at a sevadar meeting at which he is present, or when we are engaged in some activity and he happens to come by. After enjoying the gift of such darshan, why follow him around? Why not instead go into our own personal dark room, shut our eyes, and meditate? Over time, through incessant simran, we can process that image until it gets 'developed' and we are able to see the Shabd form of master within, at will.

Opportunities to be in the presence of the master are precious gifts, which deserve our reverence:

When you receive a moment from the beloved,
 receive that moment as your portion in life.
 Beware that you do not waste that moment,
 for you will find few other moments like that.

RUMI⁹⁷

Perhaps we may not be disciplined in the presence of the master because we may not completely understand who the *true* master is. Guru Nanak Dev puts it beautifully: *Shabd guru, surat dhun chela*, meaning: The true guru is the Shabd and the true disciple is the *surat*, the soul. Hazur explains:

This body has to be left here by both disciple and master.
 The soul of a disciple will never be abandoned by the
 Shabd, once it has been inwardly linked to it through the

master. Drawn by the Shabd, it will definitely merge in the Lord. Thus, the Shabd is the real master and our soul is the real disciple.⁹⁸

Everything we long for, everything we seek, is within. Hazur says that our urge to be as close as possible to the physical master actually stems from the inner longing of the soul to unite with the Shabd:

You see, everybody wants to come closer to the master, but that master is within. By doing our meditation, we are becoming closer and closer to the master. . . . So this desire to be near the master is the desire of the soul to become one with the Shabd within.⁹⁹

Another possible explanation for our lack of discipline in his presence is that we may have an incomplete understanding of love and how best to express our love for the master. There is a difference between emotion and love. There is a difference between the frenzied emotion of a teenage fan for a film star or sports hero and the mature love of a disciple for a revered master. The master tells us that emotion is unchannelled love. Hazur frequently used the example of a river flooding its banks when it is not properly channelled:

If the river flows within its banks, only then it is useful. But when the river floods, it overflows its banks and creates devastation everywhere. In the same way, emotion is very useful when it is channelled, when it is disciplined. But if your emotions get out of control, then they are just like the flood of a river which does more harm than good. So we should have disciplined emotions, disciplined love for the master.¹⁰⁰

Baba Ji tells us so often that emotion channelled inward, through meditation, leads to devotion.

Mystics say that love has two qualities: *bhav* and *bhey*. *Bhav* denotes the intense love we feel for the mystic teacher who is showing us the way. But true love is always accompanied by *bhey*, fear of offending the beloved. *Bhey* is 'awe,' a sense of reverence and wonder that makes us behave with restraint, respect, and self-discipline in the master's presence.

Love is always within. When you try to dramatize your love, you lose the depth of the love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁰¹

When we are in the master's presence, let us not get so swept up in our emotions that we create a scene that is uncomfortable for him or that simply doesn't please him. Let us not whip out our smartphones to capture the moment. Let us not get so focused on having something exciting to tell our friends and relatives later that we lose the opportunity to be present in the moment, to absorb the gift he is giving.

The master wants us to express our love not through emotion, but through quiet, disciplined action.

Running after the master doesn't mean that you have love. You may be empty within and still you may be running after the master. Yet, you may be filled with love for him and you may not move even an inch. You would like to remain in discipline, but that doesn't mean you have no love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁰²

Self-realization may be our goal, but self-realization *follows* self-mastery. So discipline is a fundamental quality on the spiritual path. Of course, the mind will resist self-discipline;

its nature is to constantly seek something interesting. When the master passes nearby, it is much more exciting to drop our seva and follow him than to continue working. When we are privy to a juicy bit of information, it is much more interesting to share it with satsangi friends than to digest it. But if we can't control the mind and resist these small temptations in seva, how will we conquer the mind during meditation; how will we digest any inner experiences we have during meditation?

Although self-discipline begins with willpower, it doesn't end there. Willpower is within the realm of the mind, and is therefore limited. Can the will of an individual ever be strong enough to achieve the goal we've set out to achieve? It cannot. If we study the lives of the masters, the amazing self-discipline they exhibit comes from a much deeper source – surrender. We too begin our journey with willpower, but slowly we grow spiritually until our self-discipline begins to arise naturally from love and surrender.

A disciple once asked Hazur about the dangers of being too hard on ourselves, and he replied:

There is no danger of being hard on ourselves at all. We have been too soft with ourselves all through – that is why we are part of the creation. If we had been a little hard or strong with ourselves, we would not be here today.¹⁰³

In essence, the master is urging us to be a little more firm with ourselves. Whether it is in our way of life, in the way we do seva, in the way we conduct ourselves in the master's presence, or in our daily meditation, self-discipline gives us the ability to channelize our love for the master in a way that pleases him.

EIGHT

Listening

Love listens. It is its first task to listen.

PAUL TILLICH¹⁰⁴

*T*o do any seva successfully, we first need to be silent and listen. When we listen with attention and love, we put our ego aside and are essentially saying to another person, “Tell me what you would like me to do; your opinion matters to me.” In the process, we improve the quality of our relationships with the sangat and with our fellow sevadars, we make fewer mistakes, and we open ourselves to change and growth. This makes us better sevadars.

Listening with attention

At one centre, some sevadars were building a retaining wall at the bottom of a hill. They were almost finished when a new sevadar arrived, eager to help with the project. The newcomer was asked to go to the top of the hill and bring down a wheelbarrow loaded with *three* blocks of concrete. Minutes later, a yell was heard. There was the new sevadar, trying to control a wheelbarrow that was hurtling down the hill, loaded not with three, but with many blocks. The law of gravity took over and everything crashed to the bottom. After the laughter died down, everyone present

took this as a lesson on why to listen and obey and simply do the task as we had been asked to do. When instructions are given there is always some logic to it. We can either follow the instructions or we can ask what the logic is, before we rush to make our own improvements to the process. When we don't listen attentively to what is being said, mistakes can happen.

Making mistakes is one issue – we all make mistakes. But there is an important connection between how we listen and the quality of our seva and our relationships with the other sevadars. In seva we often tend to focus on the task at hand. We tend to be less focused on the people with whom we are doing the task. But this missing focus is usually where the more challenging work of seva lies, because people approach the same task with different ideas and perspectives.

The challenge is to truly listen to others, even if we don't agree with them. It is important to understand the other person's perspective and to clearly and unemotionally explain ours. Only then can a mutually agreed way forward be found. Such listening fosters strong relationships and a productive and harmonious seva atmosphere. If we miss the very first step of listening, the entire chain of communication often breaks down and misunderstandings occur.

Most people do not listen with the intent to understand;
they listen with the intent to reply.

STEPHEN COVEY¹⁰⁵

Distracted listening or interrupting others while they are still speaking are signs of the mind wanting to be in control, that we want to show others how much we know or how little they know. But this comes at a price – we hurt others and spoil our relationships with them. Also, people who are interrupted or overridden, or who feel humiliated in front of their peers,

tend to give up and stop making suggestions. In the process, we lose out on valuable ideas and feedback.

So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.

J. KRISHNAMURTI¹⁰⁶

There are also times when we are so keen to get on with our *seva* that we've already made up our mind about what needs to be done and have stopped listening, even though the person giving the instructions is still speaking. We *hear* them talking but don't *listen* attentively. This hurried, partial listening can lead to mistakes. A Buddhist monk recalls that when he was a young student, his teacher once called him in to talk. When they were done, the student left the room, but in his rush to leave and do the next thing, he left the door half-open. His master called out to him and said, "Why didn't you close the door? I asked you to close the door when you left." All of a sudden it hit the disciple that he had been in such a hurry to get somewhere and do something, he had not been fully present. His *master* was speaking to him and he hadn't listened completely! Many would consider leaving a door ajar to be a very small thing, but this was all he needed to learn his lesson. After that, he trained himself to be aware, to always listen, and be present in each moment. He himself is the master now.

We all need to practise being attentive listeners. We put aside feelings of boredom or impatience. We put away our own desires and concerns. Even if we don't agree with the speaker, we should try to listen with patience and genuine interest. One of the most sincere forms of showing respect to someone is to listen attentively to what that person has to say.

The humble listen to their brothers and sisters because they assume they have something to learn. They are open to correction, and they become wiser through it.

THOMAS DUBAY¹⁰⁷

If we are head sevadars we have a responsibility to become exceptionally good listeners. The sevadars working on the actual tasks will always have ideas for improvement. When we listen with respect and openness, even if not all the ideas can be adopted, we may learn ways to do the job better. It is important that sevadars feel that they are being heard. It is not about whether we agree or disagree; it is enough if we just listen carefully and convey that we have understood what has been said. The sangat is best served when everybody is heard and all ideas are considered.

By the same token, sevadars need to listen to the instructions they are given – not just to the words, but to understand their meaning, because we listen with the intention to correctly follow the instructions. Careful listening will let us reflect on what is being said, ask questions, and get clarifications, because we want to do the job right the first time.

So, all sevadars have a shared responsibility to listen attentively to one another.

Listening with love

When we listen with love we create an atmosphere of harmony among sevadars and in the sangat. To listen with love requires a compassionate heart – we put ourselves in the other person's shoes and simply listen without judgement.

At a large satsang centre in India, a decision was made to revamp the special needs enclosure where the elderly and disabled are seated and cared for during the master's satsang. The first thing the sevadars did, prior to making any improvements,

was to set up a call centre to learn how they could better serve the elderly sangat. Young sevadars, most under twenty-five years of age, were given the seva of making phone calls to each member of the special needs sangat. Over a period of a few days, fifty sevadars made almost 5,000 phone calls.

The elderly sangat were touched and overwhelmed. Someone had cared enough to call and ask what their needs were! Over and over again they blessed the young sevadars for taking the trouble to call them. Some of them wept because they had not been able to visit the master for years; they were dependent on others who were either unable or unwilling to bring them for satsang. One person said that her eighty-five-year-old mother could not climb down two floors and asked if sevadars could carry her down and help bring her to satsang. A couple said that their twenty-five-year-old son was at home now on life support, and since they had to take care of him 24/7 they had not been able to see the master for many years. Another elderly couple cried bitterly because they had neither the means nor the family support to get to satsang.

Overjoyed that a call had come from the 'master's house,' the elderly sangat talked to the youngsters about their problems. The young sevadars, phone in hand, took notes while tears streamed down their faces as they quietly listened to the elderly satsangis tell them of their isolation and suffering and of their longing to see the master.

As a result of this massive exercise in listening, several things were improved, beginning with the criteria for who qualified to be seated in the special needs enclosure. The process of ferrying the special needs sangat from the parking lot to the enclosure was revamped, the wheelchair service was redesigned, the seating in the enclosure was reworked, special toilets were designated, and a separate canteen was set up with food appropriate for the elderly. In addition, an ambulance service was organized

to bring in the handful of sangat who were critically ill or on life support, so they too could get the benefit of master's darshan.

This is the power of listening with love!

A path of listening

A spiritual teacher once said that silence is not the absence of noise – it is the absence of self. It is only when we become silent – empty of ego – that we become capable of truly listening. Sant Mat is a path of listening – listening to the Shabd within. But if we don't listen to the master on the outside, how can we ever hope to hear the divine melody within? Physical seva is the training ground where we are given endless opportunities to practise listening externally. And we practise listening to satsang, to our fellow sevadars, and to the needs of the sangat. We practise listening to the master, trying to develop a deeper understanding of what he wants of us.

How well we listen has an impact not only on seva and meditation, but also on our worldly work and the quality of our relationships with family and friends. Listening helps us to avoid many of the misunderstandings, problems, and arguments we would otherwise encounter. Listening with compassion to anyone who is suffering is an act of seva.

When we practise listening with *attention*, we develop a crucial skill – the ability to listen attentively within. And when we practise listening with *love*, we train ourselves to attune to the Shabd – the power within that is pure love.

suniyai andhe paavahi raah.

suniyai haath hovai asgaah.

Listening – even the blind find the path.

Listening – the unreachable comes

within your grasp.

NINE

Humility

Seva is always done with love and humility. . . .
Love makes you humble. Love makes you meek. . . .
Humility is part of love. Love is part of seva.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁰⁹

*I*n Hazur Maharaj Ji's time, a well-to-do disciple once arrived at the Beas train station. As it happened, there was no conveyance and no porter available to handle her considerable baggage. She was pondering her plight when a plainly dressed man approached her and offered to carry her bags to the Dera. He walked with her, carrying her bags for a mile or so before a car pulled up and offered to help. There were already other passengers in the car, so once her bags were loaded there was room in the car only for her. The man who had helped her told her that he knew and trusted the driver, so she should go ahead with him while he would walk to the Dera. When the lady got to the Dera she told the driver she'd forgotten to pay the kind man for carrying her baggage. The driver laughed and replied, "Ma'am, he doesn't want or need any payment. He is a very wealthy and dedicated sevadar."

This sevadar carried a stranger's heavy baggage and walked with her for a mile, but never once mentioned to her that he was anything other than a helper. Such humility is rare.

If we do not take a humble and meek attitude before doing a good deed, do not retain it while doing and do not consider it a gift by the grace of the Lord and the master after it is done, it is snatched from our hands by pride amidst our rejoicings.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹¹⁰

Baba Ji often says in satsang, “*sevak au hai jida sir jhukda hai nimarta de naal*,” meaning: the true sevadar is one whose head is bowed with humility. In this powerful ego-challenging endeavour called seva, each one of us has experienced many cycles of react and regret, learning the lessons of humility each time.

Mystics tell us that the whole purpose of physical seva is to make us humble:

The saints initiated the system of service with a view to teaching the mind humility and in order to eliminate its egotism.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹¹¹

Saints epitomize the quality of humility. During an evening meeting at the Dera, Baba Ji was asked how he sees himself. He replied simply: “A sevadar.” This is the amazing thing about all masters: despite being extraordinary human beings and practising mystics, they consider their role to be that of sevadar, a servant of the sangat:

I am the servant of the Lord, and the Lord is in everyone.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹¹²

By contrast, in today’s world, individual achievement, success, and wealth are glorified. Humility is looked upon as being

servile and weak – something from another era. But mystics tell us that humility is a great strength:

Humility is not weakness. It is such a powerful thing that all the powers of the world have to bow to it. Man conquers himself with pridelessness. No one can defeat a prideless man, as behind his humility is acting the secret power of the Lord. Humility is an ornament of great men.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹¹³

In our quest to be good sevadars, we try to be humble as best we know how – outwardly. We may bow before fellow sevadars and the master. We may refer to ourselves as ‘humble servants of the master’ – even though our actual behaviour may be quite the opposite. We may use phrases like “I’m just a humble sevadar; I’m not worthy of the role I’ve been given.” While our intention may be pure – we are making an attempt to be humble – the master says that these are just words:

True humility never makes a show nor indulges in humble words.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹¹⁴

Humility is reflected not in our words, but in in our actions, our behaviour. Hazur used to say that calculated and artificial humility is like cosmetic jewellery.¹¹⁵ Instead of impressing our fellow sevadars, excessive expressions of humility might actually make others uncomfortable; they might silently wish we would behave more naturally.

Humility doesn’t mean that we should abase ourselves, put ourselves down, or have a low opinion of ourselves. In fact, there might be ego even in this, because we would still be thinking about ourselves. Humility means to forget oneself completely.

It has often been said that true humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less.

True humility is not something we can create. It is an *outcome* of seva and meditation. Hazur explains how meditation has this effect:

Because you see that light of the Father in everyone and you know your insignificance before the Father, everybody becomes superior to you. . . . When that realization comes, we don't see humans at all, we see his light in every human. We become humble before the Father. Then the question of hurting someone doesn't arise at all; the question of condemning anybody doesn't arise at all; the question of feeling superior to anybody doesn't arise at all.¹¹⁶

Humility is the outcome of years of meditation. Yet, despite knowing this, mystics still tell us again and again to serve with humility. Clearly there must be something we can do right now! Indeed, there are small but important steps we can take today to do our seva with a less egotistical attitude. Keeping in mind our status in relation to the Lord, the master, and other struggling souls, we can simply keep doing our best to please our master and our brothers and sisters with our seva.

Leaving ego at the door

During one of master's visits, a sevadar was told, "You stand here and make sure that men go to the right and women go to the left." The sevadar did as he was told, taking his job very seriously. The line-up for entrance into the satsang flowed in an orderly fashion – men to the right and women to the left. After some time, someone came running up to him and said, "You are needed very urgently by so-and-so. You have to go right now and see him."

The sevadar responded, “I can’t, I have my seva to do. I’m supposed to be separating the line.”

“Don’t worry about that,” the person said to him. “Go and solve this other thing right away. I’ll see to the line.”

The sevadar went off to tend to the other business, all the while concerned that he was needed at his seva post. When he was finally done, he rushed back to the spot he had been asked to abandon. He found that a potted plant had been placed where he had been standing, and that men were going to the right and women were going to the left. That’s when he realized his own importance: master could get his work done by a potted plant!

Incidents like this make us realize that ‘I’ am doing nothing. The Lord is getting things done and we are just his instruments.

The more you help others, the better; but be on your guard that in doing this work there is an idea of service to the master only, and not a shadow of pride crosses your mind. Think that whatever is being done, he is doing it and not we.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹¹⁷

Before Maharaj Sawan Singh became the master, he had donated some money in seva and then wrote to his master Baba Jaimal Singh that he hadn’t mentioned to anyone about giving the money because he didn’t want to feel proud. Promptly came the master’s reply:

You write that you haven’t talked with anyone about money so that you may not become proud. What is there to be proud of, my son?¹¹⁸

Similarly, when Hazur was visiting South Africa, a young lady in the audience asked him, “Master, how can we be humble?” Hazur replied, “Sister, what is there to be proud of?”

Indeed, what *is* there to be proud of? If we have the means to do seva, it is his gift. If we have the health to do seva, it is his gift. If we live in an atmosphere conducive to seva and have the opportunity to do it, these too are his gifts. We may be brilliant, but every flash of inspiration and every great idea comes from him. Even the desire to seek seva comes from him. He is both the giver and the doer of seva. Once we understand this, we will realize there is nothing to be proud of. The more we become conscious that our talents, skills, and opportunities are gifts from the Lord, the more humble we will become.

A branch laden with fruit bends towards the ground.

SHEIKH SA'ADI¹¹⁹

If we are not careful, however, seva has the potential to inflate our ego – which is ironic, because the whole purpose of seva is to subdue the ego. But ego can manifest in many ways: we may feel offended if someone criticizes our efforts or disappointed if we don't get the praise we believe we deserve; we may become attached to a particular seva; we may have a 'my way or the highway' attitude about how things should be done; we may get furious with another sevadar for encroaching on our seva; or we may be tempted to boast about our accomplishments.

Can we recognize in ourselves the ego we see in others? It is our ego that causes us to have angry or hurt feelings. It is our ego that judges. When we bring our ego with us into seva, it comes at a price: we risk peace and harmony in our life and in the lives of others.

*haumai sabha ganat hai
gantai nau sukh naahi.*

In egotism, all must account for their actions.
In this accounting there is no peace.

GURU AMAR DAS¹²⁰

As sevadars, we should learn to develop a thick skin. We should learn not to react and get upset if another sevadar or member of the sangat says something hurtful or in anger. As we learn to brush things off and not take them personally, we are beginning to chip away at the ego.

Occasionally we may develop a sense of pride about how hard we are working at our seva, or how good we are at our seva, or even feel that the seva could not be managed without us. This of course is natural until we are able to bring our ego under control. As good sevadars we would not voice such thoughts. However, we cannot hide them from the one who resides within, and sooner or later, if we do not overcome such tendencies ourselves, we will be brought down to earth for our own good.

The purpose of seva is to create humility and meekness within ourselves, not to achieve any leadership, to show our superiority over others, to boss others.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹²¹

While ego holds sway over all of us, sevadars in leadership roles have to be more vigilant because they can become more vulnerable to its influence. The sangat and sevadars sometimes put seva leaders on a pedestal, and this can create a real test of the ego. During a satsang at the Dera in 1987, Hazur spoke with deep disappointment about the attitude of seva leaders; yet, with his characteristic humility and compassion, he took responsibility for their behaviour entirely upon himself:

Often, old satsangis come and tell me, “You lay so much stress on humility and seva, so why do you not teach it to your staff members? They do not even greet each other with a loving Radha Soami, not to say of listening to our problems.”

When I hear such things, I also wonder what the matter is. All the members of the Dera staff are good, hard-working people and they have great love for the Dera. In their working life, they have held senior and responsible positions and have come here after retirement.

Then it occurred to me that in the times of the Great Master and Sardar Bahadur Ji, the office-cum-residence consisted of only two small rooms – one in the back and another at the front. In the back room, Rai Sahib Har Narayan used to live, and after him, Rai Sahib Munshi Ram. Their office consisted of one room only. For their work, they had just a small wooden platform on the verandah. And for fifty or sixty years they carried on their work while sitting on that dais, which was covered only by a thin cotton mattress.

Now I have built an elegant secretariat. All officers have their own independent rooms with marble flooring. They are provided with all facilities. And they have been given chairs of authority. But from their earlier positions of authority during their working days, they have come straight to the Dera and occupied their chairs here. Perhaps it is entirely my fault that I did not give them an opportunity to learn what seva at the Dera really means and what seva actually is. Seva consists of humility, of dedication.¹²²

If we wait to become humble before we begin doing seva, we will never begin. Seva is there to help us become humble. A disciple once asked Hazur, “If we are trying to do seva for our sangat, and we notice that we are so full of pride that even our attempt at seva has a lot of ego attached to the result or to the satsang we give, should we give up that seva until we can be more detached?” Hazur replied:

We should give up that ego rather than the seva. Seva will help you to create humility sooner or later. But give up the ego which you think is attached to your type of seva. By running away from the situation, we don't solve any problem. We have to tackle the situation.¹²³

So when we come for seva, we can practise leaving our ego at the door and enter simply as sevadars of the Lord.

Honouring the master's guests

At a large satsang centre, sevadars were preparing for the sangat's arrival prior to a satsang programme scheduled to last several days. A head sevadar addressed them with these words:

At a satsang such as this, the master is the host, the sangat are his invited guests, and sevadars are the servants in the master's house. By serving his guests we have a chance to please our master. As servants in the master's house, our needs become his concern, which will make us carefree.¹²⁴

When the master visits, the work increases exponentially because great numbers of people come to see him. There is an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement. Sevadars have a lot to accomplish. Cars and buses have to be parked, families guided to the children's area and taken care of, the elderly and infirm made comfortable, food and tea served, and members of the sangat guided into the satsang hall or enclosure so they can be seated in an orderly and timely way. Emotions run high. People want to sit as close to the master as possible. Depending on the size of the sangat, the logistics can be quite complicated, and difficult situations can develop quickly.

As sevadars, when we are challenged to our limits, how do we respond? Surely the master would want the sangat to feel they

have entered a haven of peace when they come to the satsang. We are responsible for this ambience – and we represent the master. When we smile and greet the sangat, they feel welcomed and they will *want* to cooperate with us. When we take the time to respond to people's questions and concerns with kindness, they feel the master cares about them. There is a saying among sevadars in India: *mooḥ band rakhna hai aur jhuk jhuk ke seva karna hai*, meaning: Speak less, and bow low and serve.

The way to God is firstly humility, secondly humility and thirdly humility.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹²⁵

There may be occasions when certain members of the sangat don't understand the guidance of sevadars or simply don't want to comply. At times like this it's good to remember that they are our master's honoured guests and then look for a way to win them over. The key is to treat each member of the sangat with respect, whether we think they are doing the right thing or not.

As sevadars we perform a delicate balancing act. It is our duty to see to the comfort of the sangat and ensure that reasonable needs and requests are met. At the same time, a degree of discipline and firm direction is necessary so that large numbers of people may be accommodated in a fair and safe manner. Some rules may seem irksome to a few, but ultimately they benefit everyone. It is our responsibility to ensure that guidelines we are given are followed.

It is a fine art to give directions without imposing one's own will, personality, and sense of self-importance on the sangat – and to do so without getting upset when instructions are not followed. Ultimately, we don't want anything we do to reflect poorly on the master or his teachings or to detract from the sangat's joyous experience of being in the master's house.

Being invisible

A wise sevadar once said, “The best organization doesn’t show” – meaning that things should be so thoroughly planned beforehand and implemented so smoothly that the sangat doesn’t even realize how much organization has gone into it. When things are well planned, there is less reason to scurry about at the last minute and less cause to distract or disturb the sangat.

The goal is to be an invisible sevadar. We should never make a show of ourselves. We should try to be invisible in terms of coming between the sangat and the master, yet we need to be everywhere when the sangat needs help, guidance, or direction. This attitude can’t suddenly appear in us when the master visits; it is something to be practised and honed over time.

Being non-demanding

A disciple reminisced that once, when he was accompanying Hazur Maharaj Ji on his evening walk in the Dera, they passed a sevadar who was cleaning and painting the rooftops of various houses. Hazur commented that this was “true seva.” He added, “He selects sites that are not visited by people so he can go unnoticed. That sevadar is a non-demanding type.”

The disciple asked him to clarify what he meant by “non-demanding.” Hazur replied, “He does not ask me for anything. It is a unique quality not to ask for anything.”

What makes us miserable is our wishes, our demands, our ambitions, our desires. When they are not fulfilled, we become miserable.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹²⁶

We know that demands, desires, and ambition have no place in seva. So we do our best to be non-demanding sevadars. We should not be choosy or selective in seva. We should not put

conditions on seva. Seva is seva; we should take what is offered and give thanks for it.

Be not among those who demand miracles. Rather, be content with working as a humble servant, without thought of reward. This bondage is not of man binding himself to man, but of the heart binding itself to Truth.

IBN 'ATA' ALLAH¹²⁷

Being humble doesn't mean that we should never make suggestions in seva. It is fine to request something that we consider to be needed and helpful. If we don't ask when we need something, and if we don't point out a problem, how would anyone come to know that a problem exists? But there is a difference between a request and a demand. Also, what we consider to be a reasonable request may not seem so to others. If the decision taken is not to comply with our request, we should gracefully accept the decision. The following is a gist of Baba Ji's address to sevadars during the construction of a large satsang centre. While this is a paraphrase, it clearly reflects that he wants us to approach our seva without any conditions:

We all come here to do seva, which is very good, but how we do that seva is important. We should not lay down any conditions when we come to do seva. Whatever arrangements have been made you should accept them as they are. Whatever they do here, they ask me about it first. I am aware that not all your wishes can be met when you come here, but this centre is new and we are still concentrating on trying to do major works. There will come a time when things will improve. This property is not mine, neither is it any individual person's. It is the property of the whole

sangat. If we get extra guests at home we sometimes have to make do. We can't always offer the facilities we wish to. We make do with sleeping on the floor or rearranging the beds and spending one or two days in less comfort than normal. Similarly, if you have to do this when you come to the centre, it shouldn't matter.

When you come to do seva here you should offer yourselves unconditionally and let the organizers decide how best to use your services. If someone says something to upset us we should not respond in a similar way. If we respond in this manner we are creating karmas for which we will have to pay. Instead we should think of it as having burnt off some karmas.

Keeping it simple

The master constantly reminds us to keep things simple in seva. When the construction of the Dera hospital in Beas was being planned, the architects kept presenting the master with beautiful modern designs and facades. To the frustration of the architects, Hazur rejected all of them. Then he gently explained, "The hospital is not for you and not for me. It is for the simple people who will come for treatment. So we don't want the building to look intimidating or strange, no matter how beautiful it may be."¹²⁸ The master was clarifying that the purpose of centres and hospitals is to be of practical use to the sangat, not to be aesthetically impressive or to showcase our superior skills.

Taking our lead from the master, we can keep things simple, too. Speakers can practise expressing the teachings in a simple way in satsang. The same is true of books and translations. Authors and translators of books and articles can make their best effort to present the material in a simple and clear way.

The master teaches us by example that the purpose of shabds, books, magazines, and satsangs is to inspire us to meditate and to fill our hearts with love for the Lord, not to display our command of the language, our knowledge of the subject, or our oratory skills.

Life is so simple but we people create so many problems and complications, that we spend the whole of our life in solving them. [I] do not know when we are going to learn to take simple things in a simple way.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹²⁹

Handling criticism and praise

How can we know if we are growing in humility? We can observe ourselves when we are tested either by criticism or praise.

For instance, when someone in the sangat or a fellow sevadar criticizes us, how do we react? Does our ego rear its head, or are we able to respond with composure and kindness? Our behaviour – our response – reflects our degree of humility. When things are going well or when our seva is complimented, it is easy to bow and say humble words. But when our seva is criticized or when someone is unkind, it is much more difficult to accept it with grace.

In the worldly sphere, praise is sought after and criticism is avoided, but on the spiritual path criticism is considered beneficial; it knocks us off our pedestal and makes us humble. Praise, on the other hand, feeds our ego and can go to our head. In seva, when we sense that either criticism or praise is about to come our way, it is to our benefit to become instantly alert and conscious of how we want to respond.

When someone criticizes us we can listen with an open mind. If there is something we can learn from it, we should.

Why should we be touchy? Let them say whatever they feel like. They've every right to comment and you have every right to reserve your judgement. Don't be affected by what they say. As Great Master often said, you can't pick up the thorns of the world but you can definitely wear shoes. You can't make them quiet, but definitely you can be indifferent to what they say.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹³⁰

We may have a 'why me?' attitude when we are criticized; but critics don't spare anyone, including the great mystics, who take criticism with such humility. Hazur used to say that critics are our best friends because they keep us on our toes; they keep us honest:

Brother, we should not mind anybody's criticism at all. I can tell you, critics are the best guide in life. We should always keep our ears and eyes open to our critics. We must weigh their criticism without any ill will towards them. If it has any weight, we should try to learn from that criticism and try to improve ourselves. If it is just for the sake of criticizing, you can just ignore it.¹³¹

Praise is trickier to handle because it feels good. In seva we may compliment sevadars when they do a good job, because it reaffirms that they are on the right track and encourages them to continue. But it is never wise to go overboard with compliments. We should remember that flattery and sycophancy do not help anyone. The challenge, of course, is for the recipient of a compliment. When someone praises our seva we might respond, "It's all his grace," or "I'm not capable," or "I didn't do it; *he* does everything," or words to this effect. There is no harm

in saying these words, because they can serve as a reminder to us that he is the doer – but ultimately they are just words. When we are praised, what matters is not what we say but what we think and feel. Do we *believe* he is the doer?

When it comes to handling praise, a thirteenth-century Indian mystic offers a clue:

We should never hear our own praise,
and when anyone praises us,
we should merge our consciousness
inwards, in God.

NIVRITTINATH¹³²

There may still be times, however, when we can't avoid hearing praise. We should be able to accept a compliment gracefully, responding with a simple "Thank you." A little simran will help us to avoid absorbing the praise.

Humility does not consist in hiding our talents and virtues, or in thinking of ourselves as being worse than we are, but in realizing that all we are, and all that we have, are gifts bestowed upon us by God.

J. P. VASWANI¹³³

Being anonymous

At times we may feel hurt because we feel that our seva is not appreciated. Maybe we feel unnoticed. Our feelings are understandable, because in the worldly sphere we're conditioned to expect a pat on the back when we work hard. It takes time to understand that things don't work like this on the inner way. Here the master is trying to teach us humility, not stroke

our fragile egos. If someone acknowledges our efforts, it is all right, but we should not *expect* to be thanked – this is not why we do seva.

In the same vein, speakers' names are not announced at satsang, because it doesn't matter who gives the satsang. And after satsang we don't tell the sangat to give a big round of applause to the construction team who just built a new shed. We have no idea of the scores of unknown sevadars who quietly work behind the scenes unnoticed to complete the projects and tasks by which the sangat benefits.

We don't know the names of the cooks who prepare the food in the langar, or the farmers who contribute the grain and vegetables from their own land, or even the truck drivers whose seva it is to transport these ingredients to the satsang centre. Throughout the world, countless sevadars perform seva as doctors, architects, construction workers, plumbers, electricians, software engineers, sound engineers, accountants, lawyers, gardeners, purchasers, cooks, cleaners, traffic sevadars, and ushers. They all work together in an intricate web designed to help and support the sangat. They are all nameless. This is seva. This is the way of the masters.

The sage wants to uplift the people.
 The people want to follow the sage;
 Only by being low does this come to be.
 The sage bows to the people.
 The people bow to the sage.
 And when they lift their heads
 Only greatness remains.

TAO TE CHING¹³⁴

TEN

An Attitude of Selflessness

*seva karat hoye nihkaami.
tis kau hot paraapat swaami.*

One who serves without desire for reward
alone attains the Lord.

GURU ARJAN DEV¹³⁵

Mystics refer to true seva as *nishkaam* – action devoid of personal motive: selfless service. We don't calculate what we can gain from serving, we don't make demands, we don't put conditions, and we don't have expectations of praise, acknowledgement, or thanks. Secondly, we should serve without feeling attached to the seva or to the people, decisions, or outcomes related to it.

Clearly this is the ideal. To actually serve with a selfless attitude is very difficult, so the master puts this challenge in context. He explains that today our every action is motivated by some desire – even the desire to seek God is, after all, a desire. He says that selflessness is not something we can practise. Like humility, it doesn't come just because we have knowledge of it and have accepted it as an ideal. We can work towards it, but like humility it is something that arises naturally within us once we see things in totality, once we realize

that we are just a fragment of a fragment in this creation – that we are nothing. This depth of understanding comes only through meditation.

Mystics know we have not yet reached this stage, yet they tell us that our seva should be selfless, without motive. They are pointing to the ideal and urging us to reach for it. They are telling us that we will reach the ideal through the practice of meditation, but we can also try our best to serve in a more selfless and detached way.

Whatever service can be rendered should be rendered. It purifies the mind and ennobles the soul, provided of course that it is performed without self-interest, with a detached mind and without lapsing into discussions or arguments.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹³⁶

Selflessness

There is an anecdote in the book *Heaven on Earth* about a foreign television crew who once visited the Dera and had an opportunity to observe *mitti seva*. They asked what the ‘labourers’ were paid and couldn’t believe it when they were told it was a ‘labour of love.’ The author writes: “How could they understand that the wages of this loving seva, done with humility and dedication, are the one compassionate glance of the master, the one brief glimpse of his radiant face, for which the disciple would sacrifice everything!”¹³⁷

True seva is selfless because it is motivated by love, and the instinct of love is to give to another without thinking of oneself. Hazur explains, “When you absolutely blend yourself into the love of another person, then you forget what you are.”¹³⁸ When we forget what *we* are, we automatically become self-less.

To love somebody means to give yourself without expecting anything in return. . . . We are losing our own identity and our individuality and just merging into another being. We have no expectation then.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹³⁹

Over the years we've probably witnessed numerous examples of seva done with utter selflessness. Sant Mat books are full of such stories, and we feel inspired when we read them. But the reality is that selflessness doesn't come to us easily. Once, a team from a large city was involved in a months-long project at the Dera. Members of the team worked with great diligence and came to the Dera frequently during that period to complete the work. When the project was ready to be handed over, all members of the team were present at the Dera, and they wanted to know if the master would consider giving them sevadars' parshad. When their request was taken to the relevant person, his response was, "Did they not get the seva?"

His comment has deep meaning. Seva *is* the parshad. Seva itself is the gift – it enriches us with the master's blessings and with a deep love for him.

People become rich by getting something from somebody. In Sant Mat you become rich by giving. The more you give, the more it grows, the richer you are in love and devotion.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁴⁰

Great Master would say that if we give but expect something in return, we are simply "lending money on interest."¹⁴¹ Expectations create a barter relationship with the Lord. Hazur would constantly remind us that in love there's no calculation:

You don't think: will I get some advantage from doing this seva? You don't calculate, at the end of a day of seva, that I have done so much and will therefore get so much. The benefit of seva comes automatically.¹⁴²

We are conditioned by the world to think, what's in this for *me*? or, I deserve something for the effort I've put into this. So it is natural to bring an unconscious attitude of entitlement to seva. We may expect to get the seva of our choice; proximity to the master; an office with a phone, a special title, an invitation to sevadars' parshad; or at the very least, respect and appreciation for our seva. It is only the selfless sevadar who says, "I'm happy to do any seva you give me."

Sometimes sevadars do a substantial amount of seva over the years, but then they may have an expectation of lasting recognition and closeness to the master in return. If they don't get it they may feel hurt. Unfulfilled expectations can bring pain and disappointment.

This is the duty of one who does seva, namely, that he pulverizes the mind with much effort and labour, and even then if the satguru does not accept it, he does not give up humility but is contented with his will. Not that he loses faith if he renders some little service and it is not accepted.

SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁴³

Once, a few sevadars were hand-picked to do a specialized seva, and their training started. Feeling exceptional, they made a request to their head sevadar: "When the master visits, can our team get a meeting with him?" The head sevadar was taken aback. "You haven't even started your seva yet!" he exclaimed.

A lover never calculates, he just gives.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁴⁴

Sometimes the spirit of selfless seva gets forgotten when we start to compare ourselves with other sevadars. At times we look at each other's apparent privileges and feel: he got this accommodation, I did not; she's allowed to sit in front during satsang, I am not allowed; he gets to attend this meeting, I deserve it more; and so on. Even if we hadn't expected something earlier, now we do, because someone else got that particular privilege.

There is a parable in the Bible about comparisons, expectations, and rewards. A landowner went out early in the morning to hire labourers for his vineyard, and he agreed to pay them a day's wage. A few hours later he went out and saw other labourers standing in the marketplace. He asked them as well to work in his vineyard. He did this twice more during the day, each time agreeing to pay the labourers a full day's wage. Later in the day he saw more idle workers in the marketplace and he engaged their services as well.

At the end of the day he paid all the labourers the same full day's wage. The labourers who had been hired first thing in the morning got upset with the landowner, complaining that they had toiled all day in the heat to earn a day's wage, while those who had been hired at the end of the day had worked for just a few short hours, yet they had been given the same amount of money. They felt this was unfair.

The landowner gently explained that he had done them no wrong; he had committed to giving them a day's wage, to which they agreed, and he had kept his word. "If I wish to give to this last man the same as to you," he told them, "it is my right to give as I please."¹⁴⁵

While this parable refers to the reward of spiritual progress, it can also be applied to understanding the real rewards

of seva. The landowner went to the marketplace over and over again throughout the day, literally drawing people in to serve him – perhaps just so he could reward them. Then he gave of his wealth in abundance, more than some of them seemingly deserved.

This is exactly what the master does. He draws us into seva just so he has the opportunity to give to us. How much he gives to each one, and when, is a mystery to us. We cannot comprehend his ways, so they may sometimes seem unfair. But comparisons and expectations have no place in love. With this simple story, Christ illustrates the contrast between the large-heartedness with which the master gives and the calculating way we have been conditioned to receive.

The sage is like Heaven and Earth.
 To him none is especially dear,
 Nor is there anyone he disfavours.
 He gives and gives without condition,
 Offering his treasure to everyone.

TAO TE CHING¹⁴⁶

In any case, the real rewards of seva are enormous. The biggest reward is that seva increases our love for the master. The reward for seva is immediate. But the reward is spiritual; it is inner, not outer, and therefore not always apparent to us. We covet tangible rewards – minor perks and privileges that have no spiritual significance and are far less valuable than what we really receive for our seva.

The greatest reward in seva is the contentment and happiness that you feel within, that you get an opportunity to serve someone. . . . It doesn't make you so happy if anybody makes *you* happy, but it definitely makes you very happy

when you are in a position to make someone else happy,
and that is the real seva.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁴⁷

Ultimately, all our worldly relationships are based on self-interest, but the master's love for us is selfless and limitless. If we want to ask something of him, why limit ourselves to inconsequential outer rewards?

From the master, ask for the master, for when he grants you that, you will get everything with him. Why ask charity from a giver instead of the giver himself?

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁴⁸

Detachment

The master frequently reminds us to be objective. To be objective in seva means to give it our best while always keeping our objective in sight: to do our seva with selflessness and to remember that all our actions should lead us to our ultimate goal, to connect ourselves with the Shabd within. This requires focus and a certain level of detachment.

*jag maaheen nyaare raho, lage raho hari dhyaan;
prathvi par dehi rahai, pamesar mein praan.*

Remain detached from the world;
keep your attention always upon the Lord.
While your body remains here on earth,
keep your soul absorbed in the Lord.

CHARAN DAS¹⁴⁹

But our emotions tend to shift in seva; when things go our way we feel happy, and when they don't we may feel upset.

The issue is not so much that seva goes up and down – that is its nature. The issue is that our state of mind goes up and down with it, because we are not detached from the results of our actions. So we can ask ourselves: Are we looking for results? Do we want things always to go our way? If this is the case, perhaps we've forgotten to keep a sense of proportion and balance, to stay objective.

We have to live in the world and yet be not of it. We should do our duty in every sphere of life, remembering the true nature of things here.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁵⁰

If we love our seva, how do we prevent ourselves from getting attached to it? Hazur often gave the analogy of a bee sipping honey from a cup. He would say that if the bee sits at the edge of the cup and sips carefully, it can enjoy the taste of the honey and fly away with dry wings. But if it dives deep into the honey, it may enjoy the taste for a little while but will eventually drown in it.

This is how it works, not just in life but in seva, too. Drawn to the joy of seva we may dive into it with everything we have, only to find ourselves overwhelmed and drowning – perhaps even doing seva at the expense of meditation and other priorities. To sit at the edge of the cup doesn't mean doing less seva or not getting deeply involved. It means maintaining a certain mental and emotional balance, not being consumed by the seva.

Work, O friend, with a detached heart. Expect nothing in return, and know how to remain faithful to the master you have chosen. That is the only thing you require.

IBN 'ATA' ALLAH¹⁵¹

Seva is one of the tools the master uses to uproot us from our deep entanglements in the world and transplant us in the Shabd within. But seva only *helps* to uproot us – the real uprooting happens during meditation. We should not lose sight of this and become too attached to seva. In a letter to a disciple Hazur writes:

Regarding your concern for your seva, please understand that we need not get ourselves attached to any particular seva. . . . Seva is just like a ladder and we are to use it for climbing on the roof. If we become too much attached to the steps of the ladder, what have we gained? . . . The satsangs, darshan of the master, and seva are the means to create a better environment for us to meditate. Ultimately our meditation, being the supreme seva and the means of acquiring faith and spiritual wealth, pleases the master the most.¹⁵²

The first and foremost mechanism for creating detachment in seva is daily meditation. Meditation will saturate the mind with the divine melody – or simply bring a feeling of inner peace and an awareness of the master’s presence – to such an extent that the mind will no longer care about the small ups and downs of seva.

Beauty lies in working without attachment. I do not mean calculated or reasoned detachment, but detachment which becomes a part of life. This is possible only when the mind is under control and saturated with the sweet music within.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁵³

Secondly, we can approach seva with the understanding that no seva belongs to us. Possessiveness is an aspect of worldly

love, but it has no place in seva. When we start thinking in terms of ‘my’ seva, we lose the essential ingredients that make seva what it is – giving, caring, and sharing.

Sometimes when we love a particular seva, we may be tempted to cling to it. It will serve us well if, instead, we approach our seva with the attitude that we are dispensable. Then, instead of hoarding our seva, we can start training a replacement for ourselves as soon as possible. If we do this, if the time comes for us to leave our role, the transition to the next sevadar can happen smoothly and gracefully, and the seva will not suffer. We can love our seva and still make ourselves dispensable. We can love our seva without being possessive about it.

We should not get attached to things. We should use them thinking they are a gift from the Lord, that they are not mine – they belong to the Lord. And if he takes something away, well, it was his property, he has taken it away – how can I grumble?

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁵⁴

Thirdly, we can approach seva with the mindset that we may have to leave it at any moment, perhaps without notice. Sometimes when we are asked to step out of a role, we may get so upset that we withdraw from seva altogether. At such times it may be helpful to ask ourselves: Is there any reason to take this personally? We know from the start that there is a rotation of roles in seva. Rotation exists so we don’t start identifying ourselves too much with a particular position. It keeps us mentally prepared to let go of the seva when it is time to move on.

When the time comes to give up a seva we enjoy, it helps to practise clear thinking. We can remind ourselves that no seva lasts forever. Seva is a gift from the master, given as and when

he sees it is to our best benefit. He may take it away whenever he chooses. Instead of being upset, we can focus on being of service in some other way.

While it can be difficult to let go of a seva, giving up a leadership role can be more painful, perhaps because we often identify ourselves with the particular seva. Seva is constantly changing – today we are in this role, tomorrow we may be in that role, and on the third day we may have no role at all. But it is only the position that has been taken away, not seva itself. We feel hurt and upset only if we allow ourselves to become attached to the position instead of serving selflessly, purely out of love for the master.

The master has told us never to get used to a position. A senior sevadar once had the difficult job of telling four sevadars they needed to rotate out of their leadership roles. He was amazed at how gracious and wonderful they all were. One of them told him that Baba Ji had said that a leader needs to be ready to step down the moment he or she is asked to do so.

jau raaj deh ta kavan badaa'i.
jau bheek mangaaveh ta kya ghat jaa'i.

If you gave me an empire,
 what glory would be in it for me;
 If you made me beg for charity,
 what would it take away from me?

NAMDEV¹⁵⁵

Ultimately, no matter how much we enjoy our seva, the day will come when we will have to retire from seva completely. For a devoted sevadar this can be very painful. It takes great spiritual maturity to make such a decision or to accept it with grace when someone makes the decision for us. At such times we can turn to meditation for solace.

Finally, we can develop a more detached frame of mind if we approach the ups and downs of seva with a slight emotional distance. There is a story about a disciple called Dada who served his master, Baba, with a single-minded purpose that inspired awe in the other disciples. If the master complimented him, Dada would respond with “Ha, Baba,” meaning, “Yes, master.” But if the master reprimanded or criticized him, Dada would respond in exactly the same way, “Ha, Baba.” Fame and shame were the same to him, particularly when the master was the source of both. Over the years his ego had burned away. For Dada, it was all grace.¹⁵⁶

In a beautiful letter, Baba Jaimal Singh advises the future master Maharaj Sawan Singh to develop an attitude of detachment. We can draw inspiration from his words:

Always remember these three points: Do not feel elated even if you receive the kingship of fourteen realms, because it would be false and transitory – if you love false things, you will be deceived. If such a sovereignty is taken away, do not feel depressed, because he who gave it took it away. It belonged to him and it was unreal. However much respect or criticism someone may offer, neither be pleased with the respect and praise nor offended by the criticism. Always remain happy and content wherever the Lord is pleased to place you.¹⁵⁷

Over the years, both meditation and conscious intention help us build some detachment towards seva. Even a little detachment can save us from a lot of personal pain. A sense of detachment also makes us more flexible. A sevadar once said that in seva we should be ready to turn mid-stride. This means that if a project we are working on is going in a certain direction but the master or the head sevadar suddenly tells us

to move in the opposite direction, we have the flexibility – the mental willingness – to pivot and change course in a moment. This can happen only if we have some level of detachment.

Slowly we learn that we can love our seva and at the same time feel detached from it. As we come to understand the true meaning of selfless seva, we realize that seva is a journey, and our master is urging us to let go of the reins, enjoy the journey, and allow seva to take us where it will.

Whatever you do, whatever you eat,
whatever you offer in sacrifice,
whatever you give away,
whatever austerity you practice –
Do these as an offering to me, O Arjuna.
Thus you will be free from the bondage
of actions yielding good and evil fruits.

BHAGAVAD GITA 9.27–28¹⁵⁸

ELEVEN

Obedience

Leaving everything else aside, one must implicitly obey the satguru of his own time and faithfully follow his instructions. This will lead him to success. This is the long and short of everything.

SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁵⁹

*T*hrough the ages and in all spiritual traditions, obedience and surrender have been at the heart of the guru-disciple relationship. Baba Jaimal Singh reminds the future master Maharaj Sawan Singh in a letter: “Do nothing outside the instructions of the satguru.”¹⁶⁰ Similarly, a nineteenth-century Buddhist mystic explains:

The teacher whom you have met by the power of your past actions, and whose kindness you have received, is the most important of all. . . . Obey him in all things and disregard all hardships, heat, cold, hunger, thirst and so on. . . . Accept everything he says without disobeying a single point. . . . The teacher is the main refuge.

PATRUL RINPOCHE¹⁶¹

Every mystic path shares one core principle: To achieve success, the disciple must obey the master’s instructions

unconditionally and without reservation. But obedience doesn't come easily to us, and the idea may even be distasteful to some. This resistance is natural – it is deeply rooted in our social conditioning. In today's world, by the time we reach adulthood many of us are unwilling to obey our own parents, not to mention anyone else. We have been conditioned to believe that to succeed we must assert our own individuality and will. Words like humility, obedience, and surrender tend to be associated with mindlessness, subservience, and weakness. Our education, abilities, and achievements create additional obstacles. If we think we know more or have achieved more than others, why would we obey them?

Disobedience can also play a positive role in the world. In families where the development of qualities like assertiveness is encouraged, it makes it possible for young adults to leave home and strike out on their own. In certain societies, people feel they must resist injustice, tyranny, cruelty, oppression, and discrimination, if necessary by civil disobedience. Some great revolutions and civil rights movements, which began as acts of disobedience, have made the world a better place for many people.

The question is: Does the same principle apply in spirituality? It does not. In the realm of spirituality there are only two players – guru and disciple. The word 'guru' is a combination of two roots in Sanskrit: *gu*, which means 'darkness,' and *ru*, which means 'light.' The guru is one who leads us from darkness into light. The word 'disciple' comes from the Latin root *discire*, 'to learn.' This means that we are here to learn, and the master is here to teach.

Obedience and surrender are at the heart of all learning. From the time we were born, someone has held our hand and taken us forward. Had we not obeyed our parents, teachers, and professors and learned what they taught us, where would we be today?

The guru-disciple relationship is one we've chosen voluntarily, out of love – so disobedience has no role to play here. There is no injustice, tyranny, or oppression to be resisted – the master is entirely loving, entirely benevolent, and has only our best interests at heart. This is a relationship of love and trust, and obeying the one we love is the ground for all transformative learning:

Everywhere, we learn only from those whom we love.

GOETHE¹⁶²

Whatever we may have achieved in the world, on the path of spirituality we are just beginners. A true master has travelled the inner path, overcome all challenges, and reached the destination. Only such a teacher can lead us within and extricate us from the cycle of birth and death. In *The Path of the Masters*, the author says:

Why surrender your individual will or personality to a master? Isn't that going back into voluntary slavery? Isn't that another way of crushing individual initiative and strength of character? The answer is that *complete surrender to the master is the only avenue or path to complete liberation. . . .*

Suppose you are lost in a dense forest. You haven't the least idea of the way out. You might wander around in there for days and weeks and finally die of starvation and thirst. But along comes an expert woodsman fully acquainted with the woods. He offers to show you the way out. Now, will you quibble about surrendering your own will to his?¹⁶³

A young man approached an aged master and said to him, "I have a sincere desire to become your disciple, to walk on the path of love. Please accept me."

The master replied, “To accompany this caravan you must accept two rules of obedience without question.”

“What are they?” asked the disciple.

“Well,” said the master, “first, you will have to do things you do not want to do. And second, you will not be permitted to do things you want to do.”

A look of misgiving furrowed the young man’s brow. Observing this, the master smiled and said, “You see, my son, it is the *wanting* which stands between us and God.”

When we become sevadars, these are the two rules of obedience we learn to accept: There will be some things we really want to do, but we won’t be able to do them. And there will be some things we don’t want to do, but we will have to do them. And we continue on this course of obedience – in both outer and inner seva – until the desire to do what *we* want fades away, and we reach a state of surrender.

The masters don’t expect us to do anything they themselves haven’t done. In everything the master does he is obeying the instructions of his own master – to be his successor, to care for his sangat, and to teach them the path of the masters. Traveling around the globe, giving discourses, granting initiation, listening to people’s complaints and problems, and overseeing every aspect of the organization, he works tirelessly to guide us both externally and internally. Everything the master does is an act of obedience and surrender – an act of service to his own master.

*bees bisve gur ka man maanai.
so sevak pamesar ki gat jaanai.*

The servant who fully wins the heart of the guru
realizes the state of Supreme Being.

GURU ARJAN DEV¹⁶⁴

Why rules, regulations, and hierarchy?

While an attitude of obedience is a core element of physical seva, this may not always be easy to accept. We may not always agree with the rules and norms of seva; at times we may even feel that rules are getting in the way of spirituality. Quite the opposite, however: as the sangat grows, if there are no standards and norms, chaos may prevail and the focus may turn away from spirituality.

We need to be practical. As long as there is a living master, seekers will flock to him in large numbers, and the organization will continue to grow exponentially. In such a scenario, can the old processes and systems work? Great Master's secretary used to write the names of initiates and amounts of seva donations by hand in a ledger. Could this work today? To provide for the needs of millions of disciples, many properties have been acquired to hold satsang. In addition, sheds, accommodations, and toilets have to be built; food has to be provided; books have to be written and printed. For all this work, thousands of sevadars are needed, and processes need to be put in place.

Just as a traffic light at a busy intersection provides a framework for avoiding chaos, rules and regulations provide a practical framework for seva. Guidelines are necessary to provide uniformity in the functioning of our centres. Norms are outlined for giving satsang so that discourses will stay focused on the pure spiritual teachings of the mystics. And as the organization grows, some processes have to become more centralized.

If we want uniformity, efficiency, and ethical standards to be maintained, some rules, regulations, and centralized decision-making will be necessary. It is good to remember that every rule is made for our collective well-being, because the master cares about us.

Change is inevitable. As any organization grows, rules, processes, and management structures cannot remain stagnant;

they must adapt quickly. All this change can be stressful. But if we have faith that these changes are for a good reason, and that whatever the master is doing is in our best interest, it becomes easier to accept the change.

To meet the growing needs of the sangat, thousands of big and small decisions need to be made and communicated each day. The master can't personally make, or communicate, every decision, so a hierarchy – a chain of communication – is a practical necessity. A clear communication structure helps things function in an efficient way in the service of the sangat.

There is a significant difference, however, between the hierarchy in seva and the hierarchy one typically finds in a corporation or government organization. In such organizations, the higher one is in the hierarchy, the more 'important' is one's job and the greater the benefits. In seva, on the other hand, all jobs are equally valued by the master. And while an administrative hierarchy is needed for purely practical reasons, there is no spiritual hierarchy in Sant Mat. Spiritually, there is the master – then everyone else. Spiritually, each disciple has an equally direct, unique relationship with the master.

*jo gur kahai soyi bhal meetha
man ki mat tyaag.*

Whatever the guru says is good and sweet to me.
I have renounced the intellectual wisdom
of my mind.

GURU ARJAN DEV¹⁶⁵

Obedience to the master

The master doesn't expect unquestioning obedience on seva matters. He expects us to contribute our expertise and knowledge; he asks for our opinions, encourages healthy discussion, and wants to be fully informed about all the factors that may influence a decision.

For instance, if we are architects and the master tells us to build something inconsistent with the local code, he doesn't expect us to go ahead and do it. He expects us to let him know if there's a valid reason to make a different decision and to engage with him in finding the right solution. At the same time, if we voice a differing opinion on some issue and the master still insists on the opposite, we should simply obey as he has taken the responsibility on himself for reasons best known to him.

The master is responsible for his disciple in all matters. The disciple should therefore lovingly carry out the orders of the master, and not let his own whims interfere with them, even though the master's orders may sometimes appear a trifle strange at the first glance.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁶⁶

When a satsangi professor retired from his job, he asked Hazur if he could move to the Dera to do seva in the publications department. Hazur gave him permission to move to the Dera, but assigned him to the fruit and vegetable department. The professor must have been very surprised with this assignment, but he did his seva with dedication. Over the years he was transferred from department to department, as is the custom at the Dera, until finally, about twelve years later, he was transferred to the publications department and made the head of the department. He eventually was given the position he'd hoped for. To his credit he had persisted for twelve years doing whatever the master wanted him to do until the master felt the time was right to put him in charge of what he was 'most qualified' to do. During these twelve years he probably learned lessons and new skills that helped him in ways he wasn't even aware of.

*salaam jabaab dovai kare mundhhu ghutha jaaye.
Nanak dovai koorreeya thaaye na kaa'i paaye.*

One who offers humble greetings
 and is defiant at other times
 is deluded from the beginning.
 Says Nanak: Both his responses are false –
 he finds no place with God.

GURU ANGAD DEV¹⁶⁷

There is a story about Malik Ayaz, a slave who rose to the rank of general in the army of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni. Ayaz's love for the sultan was legendary and the subject of many stories. It is said that all the courtiers were jealous of Ayaz because the sultan greatly favoured him. One day the sultan asked his treasurer to bring the most magnificent pearl in his treasury to court. This rare and precious pearl was the pride of the kingdom. After all the courtiers had admired the beautiful pearl, the king turned to his chief minister and ordered him to smash it. He refused to do it. The pearl was worth too much! The sultan rewarded him with a robe of honour.

One by one, some fifty courtiers were asked to smash the pearl. Each one protested that it would be tragic to destroy it, and each one was rewarded with a robe of honour. Then the sultan turned to Ayaz and repeated his order. Without hesitation, Ayaz grabbed a hammer and smashed the pearl to pieces. The shocked courtiers screamed at Ayaz for destroying it, but Ayaz silenced them by saying simply, "The command of the sultan is more precious than this pearl."

If we love the master, we will obey him. If we disobey his instructions, then no matter how many words of love we may use, it is not love. Christ says:

But why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things
 which I say?¹⁶⁸

In *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh says:

Whatever is done according to the instructions of the satguru is the satguru's work and is spiritual in nature.¹⁶⁹

This is a significant statement. When the master gives us advice about anything – organizing satsang, giving satsang, building maintenance, or about any aspect of our lives – it serves us to *listen* attentively to him, think deeply about what he is telling us, and then turn his words into action. We should try to give his advice a practical shape in our daily lives.

We should consider what we should do when we wish to please someone. The main thing would be to obey him implicitly. We should not transgress his directions even by a hair's breadth.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁷⁰

The story goes that the spiritual master Ibn Khafif had two disciples, Ahmad the Older and Ahmad the Younger. Ibn Khafif thought Ahmad the Younger was the better disciple, but everyone disagreed. So he gave the two a test. First, he told Ahmad the Older to carry a camel onto the roof.

“But, master,” said Ahmad the Older, “How can anyone carry a camel onto the roof?”

Then Ibn Khafif ordered Ahmad the Younger to do the same thing. Ahmad the Younger instantly rolled up his sleeves and ran out of the house. Putting two hands under the camel's belly, he took a deep breath and heaved with all his might. But he couldn't budge the camel. So he tried again and failed.

“That's enough,” said Ibn Khafif. “Now we all know who is the better disciple.”

Such incidents simply act as a mirror, showing us where we stand in our journey as disciples. The master doesn't need to test us; he knows us through and through. And God forbid if he ever were to test us, because only a rare one would pass such a test.

He who works and serves for the sake of God is sure to be rewarded. In this service, the sheikh's requests should be treated as commands to be acted upon at once without delay, no matter how difficult the task may be.

MUZAFFER OZAK AL-JERRAHI¹⁷¹

The master's instructions may seem baffling at times because he has a plan that he is not ready to reveal. In *Treasure Beyond Measure* we read that Hazur had qualified as a lawyer, yet one day Great Master told him to give up his flourishing law practice and work with his father on the family farm. Any other person would have been confused, if not upset. But Hazur was an obedient disciple and did as he was told.

Hazur later said that it was only when he was passed the mantle of mastership that he understood Great Master's foresight and planning. As things turned out, his legal knowledge was useful in managing the legal affairs of the Dera, and the knowledge he had acquired while working on the farm helped him to organize the Dera's administrative matters. While recalling his early years with the Great Master, Hazur once said: "Worldly things! We often discussed everything with him. Actually not discussed – we listened, we received orders and obeyed them; no questions had to be put. For everything else we kept quiet."¹⁷²

We can bring the same simplicity to our relationship with the master – the attitude that "If he has said it, that's it." Such obedience comes from a place of deep faith – faith that he loves us and will do only what is in our best interest. Obedience to the master is at the core of the spiritual path.

To stay within the directives of the perfect guru is the real work.

BABA JAIMAL SINGH¹⁷³

Taking instructions from each other

Most of us do not get an opportunity to interact directly with the master; we get our instructions through an intermediary. While we are willing to obey the master, sometimes we find it difficult to take instructions from another sevadar who is in charge. But we should appreciate the fact that most sevadars are doing their best to carry out the will of the master.

Seva means to do what we are asked to do. Not what we want to do, not what we think should be done, just what we are asked to do. When we come to seva, let us be willing to perform *any* task. Let us offer ourselves unconditionally and let those in charge decide how best to use our services.

Remain watchful for his command; keep in mind the guru's words and act accordingly. He may order you to cut grass – for you that is the highest honour. Welcome it wholeheartedly as sweetness itself. Test your mind in this manner; only then is the work complete.

BABA JAIMAL SINGH¹⁷⁴

Sometimes, however, we might genuinely think a wrong decision has been made. Is it appropriate to question such decisions? Of course it is. The master doesn't expect us to always give blind obedience in seva if we feel strongly about something.

If a head sevadar makes a questionable decision we can talk about it honestly and openly with the person and make whatever point we need to make – as long as we do it in a kind and respectful way. If the head sevadar still does not change his or her mind, then we can accept that the decision is part of the sevadar's seva responsibility and is out of our hands, so we should do as we've been asked to do.

When it comes to following instructions we don't entirely agree with, it is helpful to remember that we follow them

because we want to maintain an atmosphere of harmony and teamwork, not because we are in any way inferior to another person. Harmony and cooperation please the master more than determining who is right and who is wrong.

Our master wants us to *cooperate* with each other. Cooperation is not blind obedience. It involves sevadars working together to come to a mutual understanding. Cooperation and mutual respect are crucial to any seva because we are all working towards a common goal.

When we approach disagreements with an attitude of cooperation rather than division, it is easier to let go of our rigid opinions. We remind ourselves that our point of view is just that – *our* point of view. We assume that those given the responsibility of management, of making the day-to-day decisions, are doing their best to follow the master's guidance. They may not always be able to explain the reasoning behind their decisions; they may also make wrong decisions at times, but we can assume they are doing their best. And even if we get upset with the person making the decision, we can respect his or her seva, the responsibility that person has been given by the master.

Our attitude is also important. If we do not agree with something in seva, do we let everyone know we are unhappy? Do we say negative things about the head sevadars to anyone willing to listen? If we are unhappy in seva and express our discontent to others while continuing in our seva in a begrudging manner, then the sangat suffers. The disharmony we create by such actions is far worse than who is right and who is wrong. None of us is perfect. We should show understanding and compassion for each other's limitations.

One should be pleased and grateful for the privilege of being able to serve. The task one is given should not be

resented or carried out reluctantly; otherwise the spiritual benefit will be lost.

MUZAFFER OZAK AL-JERRAHI¹⁷⁵

At another time, in another seva, the roles might be reversed. We may be the ones asked to coordinate or supervise a seva project. When we find ourselves in a role where we have to give guidance to others, it's useful to remember some basic tenets of seva: that a higher position in the hierarchy doesn't give us status or prestige and a lower position doesn't take anything from us. Head sevadar, team leader, secretary, and so on are just names for different sevas, not for different ranks. If we have been assigned such seva it is simply a duty; others have been assigned other duties.

What matters is our attitude, and a leadership role requires us to be particularly kind and compassionate. We should try never to boss others, hurt their feelings, or expose their weaknesses because, as Hazur often reminded us, we are *all* struggling souls:

And especially the leader of a meeting should be very humble. He should never try to project that he is in any way superior to others. We are all struggling souls on the path. We all have our human failings. Some are exposed, some are not exposed. So we don't go there to expose the weaknesses of other people. We go there to help them, to pull them out of their weaknesses, not to expose them or boss over them.¹⁷⁶

When we find ourselves in a leadership role, we should do only that which we have been instructed to do. We should try to be as open and transparent as possible about the reasons for our decisions. If there is disagreement, we should make the

effort to continue to explain the reasons for the decision and try our best to arrive at a consensus. Whenever the situation allows, we should try to make decisions collectively. In essence, we should do our best to be open to suggestions and feedback, because we know that there is always another perspective. Instead of giving orders, we should try to communicate with fellow sevadars in a way that gives them a comfort level and encourages them to cooperate. We should do our best to help fellow sevadars succeed in their seva.

Most important, it's helpful to keep in mind that when sevadars are obedient to a team leader, their sentiment is actually being directed to the master – it stems from their love for him. The qualities of obedience and humility that sevadars bring to their seva are precious gifts and should be handled with the greatest care.

Hazur once described the attitude that best serves a head sevadar:

He should feel that he's their servant. He has been given this seva and opportunity by the master, and he should be happy to be their servant and not try to boss over or act as if he is superior to them. He must be humble and meek. Only then can he be perfect in his seva. Only then can he do his duty. If he starts thinking that he's a boss, that he's superior to the others, then the ego comes in and he loses the opportunity of that seva.¹⁷⁷

Whether we are in a role that requires us to take or give instructions, it is always best to assume that everyone offering to do seva does so with the desire to selflessly serve the master and the sangat. Head sevadars don't *want* to make mistakes or hurt sevadars; sevadars don't *want* to criticize or be wilful. We are *all* struggling with the antics of the mind and ego, and

understanding our mutual struggle can be a starting point in dealing with one another.

When we have disagreements with each other, the master wants us to work them out. It's not a question of who is right and who is wrong; it is always about how we are communicating with each other. Working together is never about giving orders and receiving blind obedience; it is always about love, cooperation, teamwork, and harmony. As Sardar Bahadur Ji puts it so beautifully:

Sant Mat is a path of love and persuasion, not of compulsion and coercion.¹⁷⁸

When we work together to create something out of love, we build a stronger association with the master and a positive atmosphere that supports our meditation.

Misconceptions about obedience

Certain misconceptions about seva can cause us to prioritize other qualities above obedience. For instance, we may believe it's more important to demonstrate our 'respect' for the master than to obey him. It is said that once Sardar Bahadur Ji wanted a painting hung on the wall above his bed. He asked a sevadar to climb on his bed and hammer in a nail. The sevadar was mortified and refused to do so. How could he step on the master's bed? He went and got a ladder, climbed on it and did the job. Amused, Sardar Bahadur Ji commented, "You are unable to step on my bed, but you have no problem stepping on my words!"

The words of the master are not separate from him. The master pervades them. His words are outpourings of his heart and are permeated with his truth and soul force.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁷⁹

Another common misconception is that faith in the master's protection can take precedence over obedience. For example, sevadars at construction sites sometimes refuse to wear helmets, harnesses, protective eye-glasses, and other safety equipment. Maybe we feel that because we have faith in the master, no harm will befall us. But let's examine this for a moment. The fact is that when safety measures are not implemented, accidents do happen at our seva sites, and both minor and major injuries occur.

On the other hand, many injuries have been prevented because sevadars were wearing the correct safety equipment. While the instructions to wear safety equipment may come from a sevadar there should be no doubt that the master wants us to take every precaution possible and to wear safety equipment when doing any work that requires it. In many countries, construction site safety is taken very seriously, and there are an enormous number of rules and guidelines to be followed. If we don't study and follow these rules, we could get the organization in trouble for breaking the law. Baba Ji once said that *no* sevadar should be allowed to do seva without proper safety equipment. So the focus on safety is necessary, not just in countries where construction safety laws are strictly enforced by local authorities, but also where they are not.

Baba Ji was once touring a new site for the first time. The local sevadars told him that disease-carrying ticks had been discovered on the site and all sevadars who came for seva would need to wear protection. Immediately the master asked for tick spray and sprayed his clothes. Then the sevadars realized he was making a point that we should always take proper precautions and should not slack on safety measures. With the simple act of spraying himself, the master gave his sevadars a powerful image they would never forget and fortified their determination to implement the safety rule.

Although we tend to associate safety with construction sites for the most part, safety concerns are many and varied – especially in the care and repair of machines and equipment. Gardening tools can injure sevadars; burns and accidents can happen in a cafeteria or langar with hot stoves and boiling liquids. People can slip and fall on a floor or in a wet bathroom. Even careless driving while on a seva site can seriously injure someone.

The entire sangat needs to be kept safe. If proper systems are not in place, then situations like stampedes can occur in crowds, injuring people. Having faith in the master doesn't mean we have the license to take risks with our lives and the lives of others. We have a moral obligation to take all necessary precautions. There is an old adage that says: *When going to sleep at night, first hobble your camel, then trust in the Lord.* We have to do our part.

If we really love him, we will obey him. We cannot say we love him and, at the same time, not obey his instructions, not live the life he tells us to live.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁸⁰

Sometimes we may mistakenly believe that expressing our love for the master or fulfilling our longing for darshan can take precedence over obedience. In October 1947, Hazur travelled from Sikanderpur to Amritsar to see Great Master, who had been admitted to a hospital there. On the way, Hazur stopped at the Dera and found that except for Sardar Bahadur Ji, no other administrators or responsible sevadars were present. Not knowing that Great Master had directed all sevadars and officials to remain at the Dera, he told Sardar Bahadur Ji, “Why don't you come to Amritsar with me in my car? I'll drive you back here this evening.” Sardar Bahadur Ji replied, “Maharaj Ji's orders are to stay in the Dera. I cannot come with you.”

Hazur drove on to Amritsar. When he reached there he realized that out of worry and concern for the Great Master, all the other Dera administrators had used some excuse or other to come to Amritsar. When he narrated his conversation with Sardar Bahadur Ji to the Great Master and informed him that Sardar Bahadur Ji was the only senior sevadar present in the Dera, tears came to Great Master's eyes. He said, "Of all the people in the Dera, only Jagat Singh has obeyed me." The following year, in his will, Great Master appointed Sardar Bahadur as his successor.¹⁸¹

What a powerful and inspiring image this is for us. Sardar Bahadur Ji's single-minded obedience brought tears to the master's eyes!

He who obeys the master is dear to him.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH¹⁸²

Nothing is more important than obedience to the master. In the early days of Hazur's mastership, he called a sevadar to come and help him reply to some long overdue letters from overseas disciples. The sevadar didn't take the new master's request seriously, and instead of going to Hazur's house to do the seva requested of him, he sat in meditation. This happened for three consecutive days. Every day Hazur would ask him to come for seva, but he would sit in meditation instead. On the fourth day, when he did the same thing, he realized that the Shabd, instead of pulling him up, was pushing him out. In spite of his best efforts, he could not succeed in raising his consciousness within. Then it dawned on him that this was happening because of his disobedience to the master. Immediately, he went to Hazur and apologized to him and did the seva requested of him.¹⁸³

So we see that obedience to the master takes precedence over longing for darshan or any outward show of respect, faith, love, or concern for him.

We are all trying to be sevadars, and our aim is to have our seva be accepted by the master. He is so loving that even if we don't do our seva very well, he seems to accept it. He understands that each one of us is at a different point on the spiritual journey and he wants to encourage us. But mystics urge us to go deeper – to make every effort to do only that which truly pleases our master:

One should be careful to do only that which is pleasing to the satguru – that is, even while performing seva, he should see if the guru is really pleased with the service which he renders, or whether he accepts it to avoid displeasing the disciple. If he succeeds in finding out that the satguru is accepting this on account of his insistence only, and it is really troublesome to him, he should at once give up that seva.

SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁸⁴

Obedience is the foundation

In our relationship with the master, words are not essential – obedience is the language of spiritual love; obedience is the foundation on which our discipleship is built.

As obedience in physical seva becomes a habit, it slowly conditions the mind and strengthens our resolve to be obedient in our meditation – the paramount obedience the master asks of us:

If we really have faith in him, if we really love him, we will want to do what he wants us to do. And he wants us to meditate; therefore, we should also try to meditate.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁸⁵

There is a lovely irony in living a life of obedience. One might think that if we were to spend a lifetime implicitly obeying someone, we would have to live a life of constraint and restriction. On the contrary: when we obey someone who is all good, who is teaching us how to gain power over our lower tendencies, who is teaching us how to turn from outward gratification to inner peace, we find that instead of remaining a slave to impulses and events, we become free to follow our real goal. Far from constraining us, obedience to an ever-loving master leads us to ultimate freedom.

And a life of unconditional obedience doesn't make us into meek doormats, as some may fear. It makes us powerful and fearless, for who can harm one who walks in the shadow of the master?

*guru ko sir par raakhiye, chaliye aagya maahin;
kahai Kabir ta daas ko, teen lok dar naahin.*

One who surrenders to the Guru's will
and always remains under his command –
That disciple has nothing to fear
in the three worlds, declares Kabir.

KABIR¹⁸⁶

TWELVE

Surrender

*guru ki mauj raho tum dhaar,
guru ki raza samhaalo yaar.
guru jo karen so hitkar jaan,
guru jo kahen so chit dhar maan.*

Live in the will of the master, my friend,
and hold it dear to your heart.
Consider as beneficial
whatever the master does,
and accept with an open heart
whatever the master says.

SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁸⁷

*M*ost sevadars have heard the classic story of the mud platforms. This story is worth revisiting because it epitomizes the real meaning of surrender and beautifully illustrates the difference between obedience and surrender.

From obedience to surrender

The time had come for the third Sikh guru, Guru Amar Das, to declare his successor. Several of his disciples believed they would be the fortunate one. Guru Amar Das put them through a test. He asked each disciple to build a small mud platform. When the platforms were built, he said they weren't good enough

and requested his disciples to tear them down and build them again. They obeyed. But then Guru Amar Das said the platforms weren't in the right location. He told his disciples to demolish them and build new ones in another location.

This carried on. Each time the disciples built their platforms, the guru rejected them and asked that they be built again. Frustrated with the endless task, some of his disciples concluded that Guru Amar Das, who was very old at that time, had become senile, and they abandoned the seva. A few remained, but each time they built a platform he rejected it. One by one, they too gave up. In the end, only one disciple was left – Ram Das.

The other disciples mocked Ram Das as he continued to obey his guru's instructions over and over again. They told him the guru had gone insane and it was foolish to try to please him. Ram Das responded, "Brothers, the whole world is blind. If there is one man who can see, it is the satguru. Then, too, the whole world is mad. It is only the satguru who is sane."

The disciples responded that both he and the guru were out of their minds. Ram Das replied, "Brothers, you may say whatever you like about me, a worthless servant of the Lord. But do not, I beg of you, utter a single disrespectful word about my satguru. Even if I should have to make platforms for the rest of my life in obedience to the satguru's wishes, by his grace I will continue to do so."

Ram Das patiently and cheerfully made and remade his platform seventy times. Finally, Guru Amar Das said to him, "You may stop building now, Ram Das. I am very pleased with you, for you alone have given me implicit obedience and completely surrendered to my will." He embraced Ram Das and filled him with spiritual wealth.

Turning to the others, Guru Amar Das said, "Not one of you obeyed one of the first rules of being a true disciple – to

give the satguru your full love and devotion, have utter faith in him, and obey his wishes with a cheerful heart.”¹⁸⁸

There is so much we can learn from this story. All the disciples were assigned a task; initially they obeyed the master because they loved and revered him, and obedience was automatically part of the relationship. Why then did they eventually stop building platforms? Because obedience is limited; obedience can take us only so far.

In obedience, we do as we are asked. In surrender, too, we do as we are asked. But there is a difference between the two. Obedience is an *action*, an action that is sometimes motivated by self-interest, sometimes by love, and sometimes by fear – fear of another person, fear of public opinion, fear of breaking age-old rules and traditions, or fear of offending the beloved.

Surrender goes beyond obedience. It stems from pure love; no fear or external factor is involved. Surrender is not an action; it is a *state of being* in which a person voluntarily, consistently, and cheerfully obeys another, without hesitation.

The relationship between obedience and surrender is that one leads to the other. We begin with obedience. With each small act of obedience we are being emptied of ego, attachments, and wants, and with this our love grows, our faith deepens. Ultimately, consistent acts of obedience – in both outer and inner *seva* – lead to surrender. The state of real surrender is a high spiritual state known as *sharan*, which means ‘to take refuge in someone.’

*meena sam layi guru sarna,
ab raha na mohe kuchh karna.*

I have taken refuge in my guru
like a fish in the ocean,
And nothing else remains to be done.

SOAMI JI MAHARAJ¹⁸⁹

We have not yet reached this state of *sharan* because we still have ego – ‘me’ and ‘mine.’ To seek *sharan* means to pursue the process of giving ourselves up to the master, unconditionally. As we slowly learn to surrender ourselves to the inner master 100 percent, one day we will reach the state where we are able to say:

*toohiyon hain main naahi ve sajjana,
toohiyon hain main naahi.*

You alone exist! I do not, O Beloved.

You alone exist, I do not.

BULLEH SHAH¹⁹⁰

In an evening meeting, Baba Ji was asked about surrender. He explained that surrender means that if the master looks at the sun and says, “What a beautiful moon!” then the disciple, without a thought, looks at the sun and says, “What a beautiful moon!” He added that if we could surrender like this we would not have to meditate, but surrender like this is not easy. It can be achieved only through meditation.

The key words in the master’s definition are “without a thought.” Let us imagine a scenario. A few sevadars are walking with the master, and as they pass a lake he suddenly turns towards them and says, “Jump in.” Immediately an avalanche of thoughts cascades through their minds: Why does he want us to jump in? The water doesn’t look clean. My clothes will get wet! After all these thoughts, if they go ahead and jump in, this is an act of obedience. Surrender is something quite different. In surrender, we just jump in – we obey without hesitation.

To surrender to the master, first we try to understand the will of the master:

What is the master’s will? If we don’t know what the will of the master is, how can we surrender to it? Surrendering

to the will of the master means helping ourselves to rise above the realm of mind and maya, helping our soul to leave the mind. When we make the soul whole and pure, then we are surrendering to the will of the Father, the will of the master.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁹¹

A disciple once asked Great Master if there was any other way besides meditation to achieve salvation. Great Master promptly replied, “Surrender.” The disciple asked, “How can I surrender?” Great Master responded, “Through your meditation.” He then added, “Rest assured, meditation is the easy way. Surrender, only one in a million can do.”¹⁹²

For us, the only way to achieve surrender, and ultimately liberation, is through meditation:

You can't surrender your ego without meditation. These are all intellectual surrenderings: “I have given my ego to you; I have surrendered my mind to you; I live in the will of the Father; I don't do anything without the master's permission” – and the next moment you will dance to the tune of the mind. This is no surrender. It may be good to think like that, but real surrender comes only by meditation.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁹³

There are two levels of surrender, however: outer and inner. Outer surrender is what we can practise every day. It involves consistent acts of obedience – doing our meditation every day, aligning our way of life with the principles of the path, and being obedient to the master's instructions in seva. This outer surrender ultimately leads to inner or real surrender:

To attain that real surrender, which we call *sharan*, we have to remain within the dictates and principles that were told to us at the time of initiation. We have to put forth our honest efforts to remain on the path, to give time to meditation. That, in a way, is surrender to the master, and this surrender will lead to the internal surrender, the real or unconditional surrender. That will be when we see the master inside, forget our self, and merge in his will, in his love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁹⁴

While it can take a lifetime to achieve inner surrender, we can support our progress through outer surrender. In seva, this means approaching our tasks as the master's agents and practising an attitude of acceptance.

Being the master's agents

A young man, relatively new to seva, walked out of the head sevadar's office. He had just been given a significant responsibility, and he was in a state of shock. As he sat on a bench waiting for a fellow sevadar to come out of the office, an elderly, experienced sevadar walked by. Noticing that he looked upset, the sevadar approached him and asked, "Dear son, are you okay?"

"I don't know," he cried in distress, and described the nature of the project he had just been given.

"So what is the problem?" asked the elderly sevadar.

"I'm terrified. This seva is so important. I've never done anything remotely like this before. I'm just not capable of doing something so huge!"

"Well!" said the elderly sevadar. "First, *every* seva is important. And second, who are *you* to be doing it? Take yourself out of it. He is the one who does the seva. Think of yourself simply as his agent, then do your seva."

While walking or working, sitting or sleeping, or doing your official duties, always remember: “I am nothing; all is satguru’s work, I am merely an instrument.”

BABA JAIMAL SINGH¹⁹⁵

When we believe that *we* are doing the seva, we may think: “I have achieved this success; no one has this skill but me; look how much I have grown this department,” and so on. There is ego in this. Conversely, we may think: “I can’t do this project; I am not capable of managing this department; I am not good enough to give satsang,” and so on. But there is ego in this too, because the ‘I’ is still there.

Saints urge us to forget about our talents, abilities, faults, and imperfections and to look within and see for ourselves that we are simply agents – *we* are not doing anything.

I always say I am a little pencil in God’s hands. He does the thinking. He does the writing. He does everything, and sometimes it is really hard because it is a broken pencil and he has to sharpen it a little more. Be a little instrument in his hands so that he can use you anytime, anywhere.

MOTHER TERESA¹⁹⁶

An experienced sevadar used to say about seva: “Disconnect from the role. Let the work be done *through* you, rather than *by* you.” Another sevadar explains it this way: “You just have to show up at seva, then get out of the way and let him do it. It’s interesting. He is the one doing it, but you have to *be there* for him to do it. And then *you* have to not be there for him to do it.”

When the ‘I’ comes into seva, stress, worry, and fatigue come in too, because we think we are responsible. We worry about decisions and outcomes. We worry about little details that

seem huge in the moment. We walk around as if the weight of the whole world is on our shoulders. Sardar Bahadur Ji used to say that worry shows a lack of faith in the master.

So long as we lean on others he lets us do so, but when after repeated disappointments, we surrender to him completely, regarding him as our only sheet anchor, he comes to our succour instantly.

MAHARAJ JAGAT SINGH¹⁹⁷

What a comforting assurance this is – if we let go of the worry and just send up an internal prayer, the master comes to our succour instantly. But there is a caveat – we have to *genuinely* give the problem to the master:

If you give your problem to the master, then there's no problem. We give it to him to solve it – but we remain obsessed with the problem. That's not giving it to the master.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH¹⁹⁸

Baba Ji often says in satsang that when we think we are doing it, we have to carry the burden; but when we hand it over to the master, then it becomes his responsibility. What a relief it is to know that our worries and cares – in both seva and in life – are unnecessary weights; we don't have to carry them at all.

One with a heavy load on one's head cannot ascend the difficult heights where the Lord resides. Throw away the unnecessary weight and 'travel light.' When you think it over a little seriously, you will find that all weights upon your heart or head are quite 'unnecessary weights.'

MAHARAJ JAGAT SINGH¹⁹⁹

Physical seva done under the guidance of a living master is a training ground. It provides us with opportunities to reflect on what we are doing and how we are doing it – on what is simply our wilfulness and what is our master’s will.

Great Master says, “Those who act in accordance with the divine law or Will are conscious co-workers with it and act according to its provisions.”²⁰⁰ When we follow the master’s instructions and meditate, we step out of the will of the mind and into the will of the master; we put our spiritual consciousness to work in his will. Similarly, when we do our physical seva as the master’s agents – with a feeling of humility, submission, and love – we put our physical and mental abilities to work for the master. He works through us, and we have the rare opportunity to be *conscious co-workers* with the master in seeing to the needs of the sangat. We become his agents.

An attitude of acceptance

Through seva the master presents us with many opportunities to practise acceptance. For instance, there may be times when we are asked to do a seva we don’t want to do. A sevadar who is an accountant may quite understandably want to do seva in the accounting department. But the accounting department may have all the sevadars it needs, so the sevadar may be asked to clean windows instead. This person has been presented with an opportunity to practice acceptance, to surrender.

A person may request some seva, but if there isn’t enough seva for everyone who wants it, he or she may be told to wait for a while – another opportunity to accept, to surrender. The disappointed sevadar can accept the decision gracefully, knowing that patiently waiting for seva is also seva.

There may be times when we are asked to redo our seva. An architect may work for months on the design of a building at a seva site, but in the end the design may be rejected. The architect

may have to go back to the drawing board over and over again before it is finally accepted. Another opportunity to surrender. Guru Ram Das cheerfully did the same seva, without question, seventy times. Are we able to respond in the same way when we are asked to do our seva a second or even a third time? Does it matter if we are assigned to seventy different tasks or to the same task seventy times? Ultimately, it is seva.

When we accept whatever unfolds with an open heart, we begin to see that everything is in our best interest. Through different types of seva we are moulded, transformed, into the kind of disciples – into the kind of human beings – he knows we can be.

Slowly we learn to accept that along with the good times will come some challenging times in seva. Sometimes we may be assigned to a seva we love, in a team we love, with a head sevadar whose attitude to seva is an inspiration. At times like this, seva is a joy and surrender is easy, because things are going our way. We can consider these to be the rest periods. But we cannot relax for too long in seva; the moment we get comfortable, something unpredictable seems to happen. Soon we may be assigned a seva task which is out of our comfort zone. Or we may have to cooperate with sevadars who are challenging to work with. We may make mistakes. We may receive criticism. At times like this, seva can be difficult, but this is where the learning comes. Such seva is not without its benefits.

As our awareness grows, our judgements about seva – ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘easy’ or ‘challenging’ – begin to fade away. We no longer think: that department was so wonderful, this one is not; there I was happy, here I am not.

Always remember: you are never to feel perturbed that you were happy there and are unhappy here. Consider it all as his will.

Slowly, our judgements about our fellow sevadars begin to fade away. We no longer get elated or upset: This sevadar has spoken angrily to me; this sevadar has reconciled with me; this sevadar has hurt me; this sevadar has praised me. We begin to realize that there are no accidents, no coincidences, no random events, and no bad people – it is the master who acts through others to teach us the lessons we need to learn:

Whatever good or bad happens to you, through whatever person or object, directly proceeds from our loving Father. All persons or objects are but tools in his hand. . . . Suppose someone ill-treats you without any fault on your part, you should see in this ill-treatment the hand of the master working. He wants you to find out whether your pride has died or not, and how deep has meekness and love taken root in your mind.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁰²

Ultimately we reach the point where even the desire to walk away from challenging seva or sevadars evaporates. There is a quiet awareness that if the master is making us face a challenge, it is because it is necessary, and he has confidence that we can do it. We remind ourselves that the challenges he puts us through will never exceed his grace, and he will always give a supporting hand from within to help us through. We learn to be content no matter where we are placed in seva. We learn to accept his will, even when it is not immediately comprehensible.

If you can take what comes to you through him, then, whatever it is, it becomes divine in itself; shame becomes honour, bitterness becomes sweet, and gross darkness clear light. Everything takes its flavour from God and turns divine; everything that happens reveals God.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁰³

From surrender to freedom

A sevadar arrived at a large satsang centre just before the master's visit. More than a hundred thousand people were expected the next day for the satsang programme. It had rained non-stop for two days and the parking lots were full of water. Worse, it looked like it would continue to rain throughout the programme – a nightmare scenario for sevadars. When the sevadar entered the centre she found the atmosphere was more frenetic than usual as sevadars grappled with the implications of the rain. People were frazzled, scurrying about, frantic. In the midst of all this was the coordinator of the centre, the one who was in charge of it all – calm, relaxed, giving instructions, but also making jokes, smiling, and laughing.

“You must be exhausted,” the sevadar said. “You haven't slept more than three hours a night for several days!”

“Oh, I'm not tired,” the coordinator replied. “One doesn't get tired when one is having fun.”

“Fun? This is fun? But aren't you worried? In addition to all the normal visit-related seva, there is now so much more work due to the rain! How will it all get done by tomorrow? The traffic jams will be worse than usual. And how will cars park in these pools of water? How will the sangat walk through it? What about the elderly sangat? What if it continues to rain for the next three days? Aren't you stressed out?”

“I would be worried and stressed if *I* were doing it, if the responsibility were mine,” the coordinator replied. “But I'm doing nothing. I'm just going through the motions of making decisions. He is doing it all. He puts the words in my mouth, he puts the thoughts in my head, he is the one who is guiding all these sevadars on what to do. We are doing our best, but in the end, it is all him. Don't worry, it will all come together tomorrow. I can't explain how it happens. But it always does.”

*Paltu sovai magan mein, saahib chaukeedaar,
saahib chaukeedaar magan hoye sovan laage.*

Paltu sleeps carefree –
the Lord himself is his watchman.
The Lord being his watchman,
Paltu enjoys blissful sleep.

PALTU SAHIB²⁰⁴

Of course, it doesn't always come together in the end. There are times when we wish the outcome could have been better. But if we genuinely give our seva our very best effort, keep the master in mind as much as possible, accept what comes as his will, and act as his agent, then the responsibility of the seva shifts to the master, and we become carefree:

When the disciple surrenders himself to the master for good, the master looks after him in every way. . . . The child who sits in the lap of his mother need not worry, because all his worries are hers. He is carefree and happy. Similarly, the disciple, after taking shelter with the master, becomes carefree and happy.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁰⁵

All our attempts to surrender in seva accumulate over time and create a deep impression on our mind, and this has an impact on our worldly life as well. Our outlook towards events begins to change; we begin to accept everything that comes to us in life, good or bad, with greater equanimity, as gifts from our loving father. We begin see his hand in everything that happens, and because it comes from him, we stop struggling – we learn to accept. More and more we are able to take the self out of our actions and dedicate all our actions to him.

This change in perspective brings a deep inner peace, an expanding calmness, which then makes it easier to still the mind during meditation. Meditation, in turn, helps us surrender more and more in seva and in life. Thus unfolds an intensely beautiful, gradual, lifelong process of surrendering to love.

This is the path to Truth: to walk in the footsteps of the master and to align ourselves, through obedience and surrender, with the Lord's will.

*kiv sachiyaara hoëeyai kiv koorhai tutai paal.
hukam rajaa'i chalna, Nanak likhiya naal.*

How can one become true
and dispel the veil of illusion?
Nanak says, by obeying the command of the Lord
and surrendering to his Will.

GURU NANAK DEV²⁰⁶

Finally, as one sevadar puts it: "What is the alternative to surrendering to the master? To surrender to the mind? To surrender to worldly pleasures? To surrender to another person? As sevadars we have come too far along on this path to even consider the alternatives. All other doors have been closed. Now we are simply standing before his door and waiting."

A sevadar once said in satsang that if an item in a jeweller's shop has been sold, it might remain in the window – but it cannot be bought by anyone else. It bears a notice: 'Sold.' He said: "If you give yourself to the master's service, this is the notice you should bear upon your sleeve."

THIRTEEN

Love

Try to find someone who really belongs to us, and to whom we can really belong – forever.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁰⁷

*T*he foundation of every spiritual path is a relationship of deep love between master and disciple:

I heard from my murshid, from my initiator, something which I shall never forget: “This friendship, this relationship which is brought about by initiation between two persons, is something which cannot be broken; it is something which cannot be separated; it is something which cannot be compared with anything else in the world; it belongs to eternity.”

INAYAT KHAN²⁰⁸

When we truly love the master, we eventually become one with him. The Sufi term for this is *fana fi al-sheikh*, meaning “annihilated in the master.” Annihilation here refers to the dissolution of the ego; when our ego dissolves we will automatically merge into the true master – the Shabd. The true master, in turn, is *fana fi al-Allah* – annihilated in God or

united with God. Therefore it is through our love for the master that we come to love and eventually merge into the unknown, unseen Lord.

To love the guru is to love God. Perfect your love for the master. As the master is saturated with love of God, when we love the master we will automatically become filled with the love of God.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁰⁹

The bond between master and disciple begins even before initiation – it begins the day we place our faith in him. This bond is then cemented during initiation, and it strengthens with every small act of service to the master.

Love for the master

What does it mean to love the master? Great Master says, “Whenever we have a desire to express our love for someone, we should try to discover what kind of love the beloved would prefer. We should then inculcate in ourselves those qualities or actions by which the beloved is pleased.”²¹⁰ So we look for a way to love – not as *we* want to love, but as the master would want to be loved.

Hazur Maharaj Ji gives us a definition of love:

Love means obedience. Love means submission. Love means losing your identity to become another being. That is love.²¹¹

Here Hazur places before us a continuum of love: obedience, then surrender, and ultimately union. In the early stages, love means obedience – we learn to put aside our own wants

and desires and simply obey the master. The fruit that ripens through consistent obedience is the state of surrender. And the fruit of surrender is the ultimate goal of love – union.

Hazur's descriptions of obedience, surrender, and love all share the same thread – losing one's identity, merging with the beloved, becoming another being:

Driving your 'self' out of yourself and merging your will with the will of another, that is obedience.²¹²

Eliminating your own self and becoming another being is submission, is surrendering.²¹³

We have to lose our own individuality, eliminate our ego, and become one with the Father. That is love.²¹⁴

Where do we stand on this continuum of obedience, surrender, and union? Clearly we've not yet united with the beloved, or we wouldn't be here, feeling separate. Nor have we completely surrendered – most of us are not yet able to consistently obey the master without hesitation. So we might ask ourselves: Am I at least obedient? If we are not, then this could be our starting point. At our present level, *love means obedience*.

This simplified definition of love can be helpful. Lofty spiritual goals like union, longing, surrender, humility, and detachment can feel overwhelming and out of reach. It is a relief to know that love is something we can immediately practise.

Christ makes the essential connection between love and obedience:

If you love me, keep my commandments.

BIBLE, JOHN 14:15

Our master's commandments are the four vows. So for us, to love the master simply means to obey the four vows implicitly.

Baba Ji offers a lens through which to view love and obedience. During a question and answer session with young adults he was asked, "Master, what is true love?"

He answered in one word: "Sacrifice."

The master is telling us that *love means sacrifice*. This is not a different definition of love; it simply means that obedience involves sacrifice. Kabir Sahib has said, "Do you want to drink from the cup of love? Then surrender your head to the master."²¹⁵ Of course, this is not to be taken literally; it means we have to be willing to make extreme sacrifices for love.

But what is extreme sacrifice? On this path we are not called upon to make extravagant, overt gestures of sacrifice. We are not asked to leave home or abandon our responsibilities. The sacrifice required is actually far more difficult: we are to live in this world, fulfil all our responsibilities, and, in the midst of our busy life, make scores of little sacrifices every day to bend the mind Godward.

These sacrifices are often hidden in the small details of daily life. Each time we serve the master with the mind – each time we turn away from a temptation, distraction, or indulgence, or forego instant gratification in the cause of our higher goal – it is an act of sacrifice, obedience, and love.

Love is the path of complete self-sacrifice and giving one's heart away.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²¹⁶

If love means obedience, then inner seva – meditation – is essential. Hazur plainly states, "If you say you love the Master without meditation, you are just deceiving yourself."²¹⁷ Once

someone asked Hazur how disciples could grow their love, and he responded:

Meditation creates love. It strengthens love. It deepens love. It grows love. Ultimately, it illuminates you and makes you God.²¹⁸

The disciple followed up and asked, “So by doing meditation, we are loving God?” Hazur replied, “That is the height of love.” At another time someone said that he wanted to surrender unconditionally to the master but didn’t know how to develop absolute love and devotion. Hazur replied:

The only way to strengthen love is by meditation. There’s no other way, because the love which we get by experience cannot be compared to any other type of love. Intellectual love is all right. Emotional love, which is influenced by other people, is all right. Any type of love is all right, but nothing can surpass the love of your own experience; and for that experience, meditation is necessary. You can build love and devotion only through meditation, not otherwise.²¹⁹

Meditation is the highest expression of our love for the master. It takes us beyond the realm of the limited, beyond tears and emotion. It is a wordless expression of love in that quiet place within, where our heart speaks and his heart listens and responds.

If we were on a beach and the master asked us to dig a hole in the ground and told us that no matter how deep a hole we made, he would fill it with his love – would we not get to work immediately and dig with great enthusiasm? This is the gift he has given us with meditation. The more we dig – the more effort we put into our meditation – the more receptive to his love we

will become. If we dig a little and offer him a cup-sized hole, he will fill it to the brim with love; if we put in more effort and dig a deep well, he will fill that to the brim with love. The master is an infinite ocean of love, and tides of grace keep washing over us. How much love we feel depends not only on his grace, but on our effort – on our own receptivity.

*bhari bhari pyaala prem ras, apne haath pilaayi,
satgur kai sadikai kiya, Dadu bali bali jaayi.*

The master fills, and fills to the brim, the cup
of love and offers it with his own hands.
Dadu surrenders himself to such a master,
he sacrifices his entire being to him
again and again.

DADU DAYAL²²⁰

If meditation is the only way to develop true love, where does physical seva come into the picture? The practical fact is that we can't meditate all day, and even with our daily responsibilities we still have spare time. Seva, then, becomes an additional way for us to nurture that love, to remain in an atmosphere of love throughout the day. And this supports the next day's meditation.

Once a disciple asked a mystic, "Master, what is love?" The mystic tapped his forehead three times and replied, "Attention, attention, attention!"

Mystics frequently remind us that whatever we give our attention to, that is what we come to love. So when we give the master our time and attention through both inner and outer seva, we are building a relationship of deep love.

By serving the master, our heart attains union with his heart.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²²¹

Somewhere between surrender and union on the continuum of love, there is an advanced stage known as *bireh* – longing. When the soul has completely surrendered but has not yet been able to unite with the beloved, it becomes consumed with an intense longing. It is this pain of separation that finally propels the soul into union.

Gripped by intense longing, great mystics have written beautiful poems of love and longing. When we read these poems we feel inspired but also deeply aware that we are far, far away from this state of being. We may experience small tastes of *bireh* each time we get a few moments in the physical presence of the master and are then separated from him. But we experience this longing not only when he comes and then goes. *Bireh* is the longing that naturally grows in intensity with our meditation and seva.

In order to meet the beloved, intense longing comes first, in the same manner as flowers bud and bloom on a fruit tree before it can bear fruit. Where there are no flowers, there can be no fruit. Similarly, where there is no *bireh* there can be no meeting with the beloved.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²²²

The relationship of true guru and disciple must surely be one of the great mysteries of life. We discover that in this relationship it is both a matter of *falling in love* – surrendering one's ego to a higher power, and at the same time a matter of *rising in love* – exerting intense effort to reach the Beloved.

The continuum of love is not a straight line, however – a stage of obedient effort, followed by a stage of surrender, then longing, and finally union. Rather, it is circular. Consistent daily acts of obedience chip away at our ego and encourage the mind to surrender. As surrender grows, it fuels the desire to obey

the master more and more – which in turn further increases surrender. Thus, obedience and surrender feed each other in an expanding cycle; and with this the longing for union slowly grows. A lifetime of obedience and outer surrender eventually leads to inner surrender, true longing, and ultimately to union. *This* is the continuum – an ever-expanding spiral of spiritual love.

The more we love, the more it grows.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²²³

As love for the master grows, we may feel a natural urge to express it outwardly, because this is how we've been conditioned by the world. But spiritual love is different from worldly love – as it grows, it moves deeper within. Hazur advises: "A lover never advertises that love."²²⁴

Well, if there's love, there is nothing to speak about, and if you speak, there is no love. Love loses its depth when you try to express it. The more you digest it, the more it grows. It is more to experience than to express.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²²⁵

The master doesn't need to be shown how much we love him; he knows. A story from the time of the mystic Tulsi Sahib illustrates this. When a group of women heard that their master was visiting their town, they immediately dropped the work they were doing and rushed over to greet him. When they saw Tulsi Sahib, they bowed in reverence. But they had hurried from their work without thinking to change their clothing, so their clothes were soiled and wet with perspiration. Disgusted, a sevadar told them, "Sisters, your clothes smell! Go sit at the back."

Tulsi Sahib gently corrected the sevadar, saying, "You have no idea of the sweet scent of their love and devotion. You do

not know with what feelings they have come. You may have noticed a bad smell, but it did not come to me.”²²⁶

The lesson in this story is that the master sees our heart. But there is a secondary lesson here, too: when we do seva, we don't want to judge other disciples by their outward appearance or behaviour.

A similar incident occurred at a large centre that was busy with preparations before the master's visit. One sevadar was looking to do some seva, and the coordinator showed him a wooden ramp that was slippery, a potential hazard in the wet weather. He told the sevadar to attach some non-skid material onto the ramp to create a less slippery surface. He gave the sevadar the material and showed him how to attach it with screws along the edges of the ramp.

The sevadar set about the task with great dedication. When the coordinator went to review it he was surprised to see that instead of one row of screws along each edge, there were rows and rows all over the ramp, so many in fact that the goal of creating a non-slippery surface had not been properly achieved. It was still slippery.

A few days later Baba Ji came to the centre. During his inspection of the construction area he went to the ramp. He looked at it for a moment, said, “Very creative!” and then resumed the tour. Looking back on that incident, perhaps, the coordinator reflected that there was a profound lesson for him, too. “It's not about the goal, it's about the journey; it's what is in our hearts.” This particular sevadar was doing his best. His heart was in the right place. The master saw the selfless love put into the seva, whereas we see only a ramp with too many screws.

The master sees our love, and yet somehow we find this hard to believe. So we may feel the urge to demonstrate our love through some visible means, at the very least through tears. And if there are no tears – if we don't feel overwhelmed with

emotion – we may judge ourselves and conclude we have no love. But how can there be no love?

When we feel we have no love, it means we are not satisfied with the depth of the love we have. That doesn't mean that you have no love at all. Otherwise you wouldn't think about it.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²²⁷

There may be times when we look at a fellow sevadar's love for the master, compare ourselves, and find our own love wanting. But Hazur reminds us never to compare ourselves with anyone else:

So many of you tell me in interviews that you don't have love. I don't understand your concept of love and how you analyze and measure it. There is nothing to think about love. Love is just there. Our problem is that we compare ourselves with each other. We think that person is more in love than I am and I should be like him. But nobody knows anybody at all.²²⁸

At times we may look at the master's love for us and make judgements – he loves this other sevadar more than me; he loved me more before but he doesn't love me as much now, and so on. But the master's love for us is steady and unchanging – it is infinite. Rather than overwhelm us with that boundless ocean, the master simply provides a mirror – he reflects our own love back to us:

You see your own reflection in the master. If you have love and devotion, you will feel he's in love with you – he loves

you. If you are indifferent to him, you'll feel your master is indifferent to you. This is our own reflection.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²²⁹

Our understanding of love is limited, so we tend to calculate, analyze, and worry. If, instead, we would simply make the necessary sacrifices to obey the master and give him our time and attention, love for him will automatically bloom within us. It will reflect in our words, our deeds, our character, and our very way of life. This is the highest form of service. This is *guru bhakti*, devotion to the master. This is love.

gur ki seva gur bhagat hai virla paaye koye.

Service to the guru is devotion to the guru.
How rare are those who obtain it!

GURU AMAR DAS²³⁰

Perhaps the greatest test of our love occurs when the master passes on from the physical form, and we have to accept a successor in his place. It is natural that the master's relatives, friends, and the sevadars closest to him would have become attached to his personality, so when that painful time inevitably comes it is difficult to accept that anyone else can take his place.

For quite a while after Great Master passed on, many of his long-time sevadars were not able to accept Sardar Bahadur Ji as his successor. Some even left Beas, unable to bear a Dera bereft of their beloved master. But what would Great Master have wanted? He would have wanted his most loving and trusted sevadars to put aside their emotions, be obedient, and surrender to his will. He would have wanted them to stand by Sardar Bahadur Ji's side when he most needed their support as the chosen successor.

The master urges us to give precedence to the teachings over our emotions. The teachings remind us that the physical form of the master *will* leave us one day, but the Shabd form will continue to guide us through the successor. The teachings remind us that love means obedience. If we have faith in the master, then we can have faith in his choice of successor, no matter what our mind may have to say. And when we give the new master our wholehearted support, even as our hearts are full of grief at the loss of our own master, our obedience is an act of great love.

He is the helmsman of your life now, and he has only your happiness and best interest at heart. By his mercy, he is bringing you to him as swiftly as possible to give you all he has.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²³¹

The master embodies love. With the tenderness of a parent he takes us by the hand and slowly coaxes us, nudges us, pushes us, teaches us the meaning of true love, and brings us home.

Love for seva

As love for the master grows in our hearts, we want to share that love with others through service. Hazur often spoke of the circle of love and service: love makes us want to serve, and the more we serve, the more we love. In a question-and-answer session, Hazur once said that without love you can never do service. Service creates love. Service starts with love. Service strengthens love.

The more we serve, the more we discover a deep love and reverence for seva itself – not just for the ‘doing’ of seva, but for the way it connects us so intimately with the master and with our meditation.

Many of us have a great zeal for seva; we spend hours and hours of the day doing seva with great dedication, and we devote years of our life to seva. But love for seva goes beyond zeal, passion, and emotion. Love is steady and enduring – it doesn't diminish when seva doesn't go our way. Love is obedient – it doesn't try to bend seva to our will. And love is selfless – it doesn't make demands of the beloved.

The Indian epic *Mahabharata* offers a beautiful lesson on love of seva. Arjuna once asked Lord Krishna, “Lord, why do people consider Karna to be more generous than Yudhishtira? Neither has ever refused when they've been asked for something, no matter who has asked for it. So why is Karna considered greater than Yudhishtira?”

Lord Krishna said with a smile, “Come, I'll show you why.”

Disguised as poor priests, the two went first to Yudhishtira's court and asked for a large quantity of sandalwood sticks to conduct a *yajna*, a fire ceremony. Yudhishtira immediately sent his soldiers to all parts of his kingdom in search of sandalwood sticks, but it was the monsoon season and all the trees were wet. The soldiers returned to the palace with drenched sandalwood sticks, which couldn't be used for a *yajna*.

Still disguised as priests, Krishna and Arjuna then proceeded to Karna's court and asked for sandalwood sticks. Karna thought for a while and said, “It has been raining for several days so it will be impossible to collect dry sandalwood sticks. But there is a way. Please wait for a while.” Karna then cut down the doors and windows of his palace, which were made of sandalwood, chopped them, and gave the dry sandalwood sticks to the two priests.

They accepted the offering and left his palace. On their way back, Krishna said, “Do you now see the difference between

* Yudhishtira was Arjuna's older brother and Karna was his chief rival. Both Yudhishtira and Karna were renowned for their generosity.

the two, Arjuna? Had we asked Yudhishtira to give his doors and windows for our *yajna*, he would have given them to us without a second thought. But he didn't think of it himself. We didn't ask Karna for his doors either. Yudhishtira gives because it is his *dharma*, his duty. Karna gives because he loves to give. This is the difference between the two, and why Karna is considered greater."²³²

This story invites us to reflect. Do we serve because it is our duty, or do we serve because we love to serve? Baba Ji has said that *seva* is easy for one who wants to give and difficult for one who wants to take. He is pointing out that the more we *want* to give – the more we *love* to give – the easier *seva* becomes.

When we serve because we love to serve, we will find ourselves going that extra mile in *seva*. If we are told to wash dishes, we will not just give the dishes a superficial wash to get the job done; we will wash them until they sparkle. If we are told to pick up someone at the airport, we will reach there well before time, greet them warmly, help them with their bags, and see to their every comfort until they are safely dropped at their destination. If we are asked to cut vegetables, we will not just cut the vegetables; we will also help wipe down the counters and sweep up the kitchen, if such help is useful.

And when we serve because we love to serve, we will do the *seva with love*.

So *seva* is always done with love, otherwise it's not *seva*.
Seva is not mechanically working with your hands. *Seva*
 is our intention to please another person.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²³³

If we approach *seva* as a mechanical task, we will get a mechanical result. The more love we bring to *seva*, the more we will please the master and the more love and joy we will

take back within us. This is what happens when we fall in love with seva – our work no longer feels like a chore or a duty. It is pure joy. Then, as was the case with Karna, it becomes natural for us to go beyond the call of duty and do the seva with love.

The sangat does not do all this seva with the expectation that they will be rewarded, they do it out of love. Seva is love; they never ask for anything in return. And whatever the inconvenience, they never complain. They are always contented, always happy to do the seva.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²³⁴

When we fall in love with seva we become less obsessed with outcomes; instead, we feel contented with the journey itself, with the process of doing seva. In one overseas centre, preparations were in full swing for an upcoming satsang weekend. Sevadars from different local centres in the area had worked together for weeks to prepare for the satsang. The hall had been prepared, accommodation and food arrangements had been organized, seva teams had been created and briefed, satsang speakers had been lined up. All was in readiness for the arrival of the sangat. But just two days before the satsang weekend, they received a call from their representative informing them that Baba Ji had made a sudden plan to come to their country that very weekend. The sevadars were requested to inform the sangat that instead of coming for the satsang weekend, they should now go to another city where the master would be giving satsang.

The sevadars did as they were told. Later, after the sangat had been informed and after everything that had been arranged was cancelled, the sevadars sat together and talked about it. They were all thrilled that the master was coming. Then the conversation turned to how they felt about the cancellation of the weekend they had worked so hard to prepare for. They were

surprised to realize that the purpose of their seva had already been fulfilled. The seva had created an atmosphere of love, harmony, communication, and friendship among the sevadars; the seva had brought each one of them closer to the master. The seva had served its purpose, even though the satsang weekend itself was never to occur.

Only the saints know how it is that they accomplish their work in this world. The seva performed on their behalf by their disciples is infused with a coherence and serenity which is difficult to describe. And the atmosphere of love lifts us out of our little selves into a greater awareness of the master's presence.²³⁵

We feel this atmosphere when we come in contact with some of the amazing sevadars who have so much love for the master and for seva that we are humbled and inspired simply by observing them. A well-to-do woman once went to do seva in the langar at the Dera. Before entering, she stopped outside the door to take off her footwear. At the same time, another sevadar came by and took off her footwear. The woman noticed that this sevadar's simple rubber slippers were held together with stitches in six different places. As they worked side by side in the langar, they began talking, and the woman discovered that this sevadar would save up all her money to be able to afford the train ticket to come to the Dera for her regular seva. She saved money not to buy herself a new pair of slippers, but to buy a ticket so she could come for seva.

You must have witnessed so many ladies cooking, how they cook just by the side of the fire. In winter it is all right, but imagine the months of June and July when it is so humid and hot. You cannot see the fire, you cannot sit

near it and yet they cook even more than what you have witnessed here. And yet they are so happy, so contented. The spirit to serve the sangat is always there with them. It is all Baba Ji's* grace, you see.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²³⁶

One sevadar reminisced about a fellow sevadar's love for seva. This person had been entrusted with the keys of her local centre because she was punctual and responsible and could be trusted to be the first one to arrive. Over the years she worked in many different departments, and she was not choosy. When there was a construction project at the centre she would move bricks; when dishes needed to be washed she would do that. In her mind seva was seva, and one did what one was given. This philosophy was tested when she was asked to work in one of the financial departments. As a housewife who had never worked outside the home, she was terrified by the idea of writing cheques, processing invoices, and logging debits and credits. But she ignored her fear and did this seva for many years.

As a regular sevadar she was committed to go on *jatha* duty, when a group of sevadars from her centre would travel together once or twice a year to another centre or to the Dera and perform open seva. This seva was quite strenuous; *jatha* sevadars typically travelled by bus throughout the night and reached their destination in the early hours of the morning. They would start doing seva soon after they arrived. *Jathas* typically do seva throughout the day, then travel back by bus, either the same night or the next night. If you had asked this sevadar – at her age and with her health problems – if she *wanted* to go on *jatha* duty, her answer might have been “no.” Nevertheless, she happily did it, no questions asked, and enjoyed herself, too.

* In this case 'Baba Ji' refers to Baba Jaimal Singh, who founded the Dera.

This sevadar is over seventy years old and she offers an inspiring example of love for seva. From her we can see that our feelings towards seva are not always constant – sometimes we enjoy it, sometimes not so much. Perhaps the only way to learn to love our seva is to keep on doing it, even through those times when we are not liking it very much. Then, over time, true love for seva comes as a gift from the master.

*gur parsaad mera man bheejai
eha sev bani jee'ò.*

With the Lord's grace is my mind inebriated:
This, indeed, is the service I render to my God.

GURU AMAR DAS²³⁷

When we do our seva with love, it seems we even have the power to move the master. In August 2010, when floods devastated the city of Leh and several villages in the mountainous region of Ladakh, the RSSB organization moved in to help. They were informed that the immediate need was shelter for the villagers, because winter was just around the corner. A request for sevadars was sent to various satsang centres, and immediately a few seva teams were transported to Leh, along with materials for shed construction. When they reached Leh they were dispatched to different villages to build sheds. The places where they were sent were in remote areas where the devastation was extreme and aid could not easily reach.

Some time after the work had begun, the head sevadar received a call: Baba Ji would be coming to Leh in four days to review the progress. Since it was not possible to complete all the sheds in such a short time, he decided that they would try to complete at least one shed to show the master. He called the

sevadars together and told them that the master was coming, so they should try to complete their shed in four days. The sevadars agreed and returned to their task with intense energy.

News soon spread that Baba Ji was coming and one completed shed would be shown to him. Seva team leaders from the other villages called the coordinator and requested that they too be given an opportunity to finish their sheds in time for the master to see. The coordinator explained that his decision had been made keeping in mind the logistical challenges – work had to be done at a very high altitude, with limited facilities, and in a very short time. It was going to be very challenging, even for the team to which the task was allotted. He didn't think it would be possible for those sevadars to finish the sheds in time. But the other seva team leaders asked him to give them the opportunity to at least try, and so he agreed.

Baba Ji reached Leh. Since all the sevadars had worked so hard, the plan was to take him not just to the first village, but from one village to the next. But getting to the villages was not so easy. The roads were so muddy that the air-conditioning vents in the cars of the travel party got clogged with mud; at the same time, it was impossible to lower the windows because the stench of dead animals was too strong. These were the conditions under which the sevadars had been working.

Driving through this devastation, the travel party reached the first village, where they found that the sevadars had worked very hard and completed the shed. The local villagers were sitting to one side observing the frenzy of activity, amazed at the pace at which the sevadars had built the shed. When Baba Ji reached the village, he first greeted the villagers sitting to the side of the shed and then gave darshan to the sevadars.

The same scenario was repeated in each village – the sevadars had worked very hard and the villagers were deeply moved

by their dedication. Baba Ji finished his inspection of all the seva sites and returned to Leh. In the evening, the seva team leaders called the coordinator and asked if Baba Ji would be giving satsang in Leh. No such plan had been made, but when Baba Ji was asked, he agreed to hold satsang the very next evening. The sevadars rejoiced and started making plans to travel to Leh for satsang.

When the villagers found out, they said they too wanted to attend the master's satsang. This request was made by the villagers in every village! But these were poor people who'd lost everything in the floods. It wasn't possible for them to travel to Leh and back. Once again, the seva team leaders called the coordinator about the villagers' request. A decision was made that RSSB would take responsibility to bring the villagers to Leh for satsang, feed them, and then take them back to their respective villages.

The next day the sevadars and villagers reached the satsang venue in Leh. The hall was resounding with the singing of shabds. The whole atmosphere was charged with love for the master. Then Baba Ji arrived. Before starting satsang he said a few words to thank the sevadars. He said he was very happy with the seva they had done – he was very happy with *them*. He said he had no words to express his gratitude. As he said these words, he began to choke up and couldn't speak any further. After a few seconds, he cleared his throat and tried to begin the satsang but was again so overcome with emotion he couldn't speak. Finally, he indicated to the *pathi* to start singing shabds, and he didn't give satsang. Although they didn't hear a satsang, the villagers were so moved by this spectacle of love between the master and his sevadars that many later requested initiation.

*saachi preet ham tum syon jori,
 tum syon jor avar sang tori.
 jah jah jaa'u taha teri seva,
 tum so thaakur aur na deva.*

In true love am I attached to you, O Lord,
 And having fallen in love with you,
 I have broken away from all else.
 Wherever I go I remain in your service;
 O Lord, there is no other master like you.

RAVIDAS²³⁸

The master is a conduit of the Lord's love for us. The miracle of our life is that we can experience this love and that we have the opportunity to reciprocate it through seva in all its myriad forms.

FOURTEEN

Harmony

A new commandment I give to you,
that you love one another;
As I have loved you,
that you also love one another.
By this all will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.

BIBLE, JOHN 13:34-35

*I*t is easy to love the master, and most of the time it is easy to love seva, but there are times when we find it difficult to love one another. Yet this is what the master wants – that we serve together in love and harmony:

The joy of any gathering lies in the love and harmony amongst its members. Especially in Sant Mat gatherings there should be nothing but love and cooperation, as we are all walking on the same path back to our home. But the mind always finds some excuse to create dissensions, so we always have to be on guard against this subtle enemy.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²³⁹

Hazur is reminding us that seva exists in an imperfect world. We may all be good people, with good intentions, but we are

human – we have faults, we make mistakes. We come from different backgrounds, communities, and cultures. We have different personalities, opinions, and ways of doing things. As a result we don't always understand each other, and friction can occur.

A sevadar once threw up her hands in despair after a misunderstanding with her team. "I can't do this!" she said. . . . "Please give me some seva that doesn't require *any* interaction with people. Working with others is too difficult!"

When our relationships with others become contentious, it may feel like it would be much easier to work alone. But the purpose of seva is not served if we avoid difficult situations and isolate ourselves. Some of the qualities we need to learn – kindness, patience, and love – can only be developed when we work with others. Also, little of any magnitude can be accomplished alone, but when we work together in harmony what we can achieve is limitless.

What you are doing I cannot do, what I'm doing you cannot do, but together we are doing something beautiful for God. . . .

MOTHER TERESA²⁴⁰

Almost every seva includes two components: a part we do alone and a part we do in collaboration with others. Some seva tasks require us to spend large amounts of time working alone, with almost no interaction with others. Other tasks require continuous interaction with fellow sevadars, and we may struggle to find a moment alone. Both components of seva – alone time and interactive time – are important. Each brings different learning opportunities that are best suited to our unique needs at a particular time.

When sevadars come into our lives they may either inspire us or make life difficult for us, all of which is based on our own

past karmic relationships with them. Our responsibility is to work through all these relationships. In seva we usually do not get to choose who we work with. Our past karmic relationships may make the seva either a smooth road or bumpy road.

The master sets the example for us. When passed the mantle of mastership, he didn't say to his master that he would accept only the good, obedient, and disciplined disciples, but not the difficult ones. He accepted all of us unconditionally. And he teaches us that a good sevadar is one who can work with everyone.

Ultimately, it is our shared love for the master that motivates us to find ways to work well with each other. We experience this love every time we go to the Dera, but the master tells us it need not be limited to the Dera – we can carry this love back with us into our seva centres and our worldly lives. Hazur says this love is our *legacy*:

Brother, Baba Ji Maharaj* and Hazur Maharaj Ji† have laid the foundation of the Dera on love, humility, seva, and meditation. . . . That is the atmosphere of the Dera and that is the atmosphere which we take with ourselves wherever we may go. The Dera is not built of mortar and bricks. It is built on seva and love and devotion and humility and meditation. And we have to build our whole life on these principles. Only this foundation will take us back to the Father.²⁴¹

Baba Ji has said that our satsang centres offer us an opportunity to learn to work together in love and harmony. He said we have to work out for ourselves how to do this – we shouldn't

* Baba Jaimal Singh.

† Maharaj Sawan Singh.

hurt each other's feelings, we should support each other and give help to each other. He urged us to realize *our* role in this. Who is going to create that love and harmony? he asked. And he gave the answer: Each one of us has a role to play in this.

Each one of us is responsible for harmony. It is up to us to create an atmosphere in seva in which everyone believes that what they are doing is important and valuable, where everyone feels they are in a place where they belong.

What can we do to create an atmosphere of teamwork and harmony in seva? We can start with being clear in our mind about whom we are serving. We are serving our master. If we remember this, we will be better able to see the master in everyone and in every task: *he* is the *sangat*, *he* is our fellow sevadars. Then, if we fight with anyone, or complain about anyone, or fail to cooperate with anyone, in effect we are doing this to the master. This should make us reflect. Is there a problem, or am *I* the problem? Is there a solution to be found, or is the solution that I change my way of thinking?

If you are in love with the master, you'll automatically be in love with your brothers and sisters. . . . Love for the master will create love for your other fellow human beings because then you'll see the master in every disciple.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁴²

We should always try to avoid reacting in haste when someone says something that hurts or upsets us. We may get angry or we may impulsively type an indignant text or email. Then, before we know it our hasty words get forwarded to others. Words, once said, cannot be retracted. And when we react in anger we are likely to say something we will regret.

Baba Ji often counsels us: Listen, but don't react. Reflect, then act. In seva, even if the person accusing us is mistaken – even

if he or she is not aware of all the facts – it is best if we don't immediately react. Instead, keeping master's advice in mind, we can step away from the problem for a moment, saying to the sevadar, "Let me think about what you said." This gives us time to calm down and reflect on the situation, or perhaps talk to someone else about it to get another perspective. We may find that the problem gets resolved on its own. At least we should be able to respond more calmly once we've had a chance to reflect. Our objective is to learn to respond rather than to react.

The master tells us that if there is one fool in the room we don't need two. If someone is doing something negative, we can avoid making the situation worse by not losing our temper and not acting improperly. To keep the peace, someone has to exercise self-control.

If anybody slanders you or abuses you – don't accept it. It will go back to him. If you don't accept a parcel, the postman will take it back.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁴³

Giving an example from the Bible, Hazur also advises that it is wise to avoid needless confrontation:

Christ has also told us: Be wise like a serpent and harmless like a dove. The moment a serpent hears any noise, he at once leaves. And he says, be harmless like a dove. Don't harm anybody at all. But, he says, be wise like a serpent, not harmful like a serpent. A serpent can harm or even kill you with his poison. So he says, learn from the serpent. Avoid the situation. Why meet trouble unnecessarily if you can avoid that situation? Be wise. And, having all the power with you, be harmless like a dove.²⁴⁴

It is impossible, however, to avoid *all* difficult situations. At times the very nature of our seva may set up a potential confrontation, especially if our seva is to give honest feedback to a sevadar, who may then feel hurt and upset. Occasionally the issue may be more serious; we may witness someone doing something inappropriate and may know that the matter ought to be addressed, either by us or by a head sevadar. In our attempt to maintain harmony, we should not avoid possible confrontational situations, but we should respond to them with respect and love. We should not say anything to anyone that we would not say if the master himself was standing right next to us.

Being humble and kind doesn't mean that we can never disagree with anyone, or give constructive feedback, or address bad behaviour. This would be neither realistic nor productive. If out of fear of confrontation we don't give feedback when we know it should be given, or don't raise an issue when we know it should be raised, we do a disservice to our seva. After all, inaction is also an action.

Legacy of Love describes Hazur's way of handling such situations:

Never did he expose anyone's weakness. Ever gracious, ever loving, if you suggested something he disagreed with, he would bring you around to his point of view without belittling you.²⁴⁵

While we may not be able to avoid a difficult situation, we can follow Hazur's example and convey a difficult message with kindness and love. We can be firm about the process that needs to be followed, while at the same time being gentle with the person. If we are kind and remain calm, and try to understand the other person's point of view, even the most difficult situations will not deteriorate into negativity.

We should never go out of our way to hurt anybody at all. We can be firm in our faith, firm in our belief, but still we can be loving and kind in our expression. Naturally we can't oblige everyone for everything. We have to refuse sometimes, but we can lovingly refuse.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁴⁶

Seva and kindness go together. If we are there to serve, but at the same time we are unkind to the sangat or to our fellow sevadars, does this qualify as service? How we treat others is the highest reflection of our love for God and our respect for seva. Of course there will be times when there are disagreements and we will justifiably feel upset. But in seva we learn that it is more important to be kind than to be right.

Too often we underestimate the power of kindness and empathy. When we give a brother or sister a listening ear, a kind word, a nod of understanding, and a warm smile, we create an atmosphere of calmness and harmony in seva.

Always speak gently, lovingly, and selflessly. The higher the position you hold, the humbler your mind should be. A sweet word never costs anything, but wins the world.

MAHARAJ JAGAT SINGH²⁴⁷

We can remind ourselves that seva is *always* inclusive. We want to create an atmosphere in which no one discriminates against fellow sevadars because of their race, religion, caste, community, gender, or economic circumstances, or because they are in any way different from ourselves. The master doesn't see these superficial differences, and he wants us to be loving to all.

We are conditioned to look at people through the lens of our expectations, then judge them when their behaviour doesn't match those expectations:

The fact is, we do not see things as they are. Rather, we see things as we are.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁴⁸

Before we judge anyone in the sangat, it's good to remember that we have no idea what hardships they may have endured. If we were to walk a few steps in their shoes and experience the difficulties they've experienced in life, we might not be so quick to judge them. This also includes our fellow sevadars. Before we judge other sevadars – perhaps for how they dress, how they behave, or how they speak – we can remember that we have no idea about their life circumstances or their hardships. During the master's visits some sevadars work so hard that they go for days with practically no sleep, and they may go for hours without a meal. In such circumstances mistakes can happen and tempers can get easily inflamed.

If you want Him to give cloak to your weaknesses, then you should also not expose others' weaknesses.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁴⁹

Baba Ji says that we are programmed to judge, and we need to reprogramme ourselves. He often tells us that very little is in our hands, but one thing we *can* choose is the scale by which we are judged. The yardstick we use to judge others will be the one used to judge us. Great Master would say, "Every soul is virtuous. Our eyes and heart are at fault if we fail to see a person's worth, for God himself sits in every human heart."²⁵⁰

There is no joy in judgement. When we judge others, we hurt them, but we also burden our own soul. The person we judge may move on, but we continue to carry a load of negativity.

Each judgement is an added burden, alike to the judge and the judged. If you would have your burdens light, refrain from judging any man.

BOOK OF MIRDAD²⁵¹

Sometimes a fellow sevadar may hurt our feelings. We may hold on to the hurt for a while, then decide to ‘forgive’ the person. We might consider such forgiveness to be a sign of our large-heartedness and compassion. But Baba Ji asks, Who are we to forgive others? Isn’t there an element of arrogance in this? He says that if we don’t judge the person’s behaviour in the first place, there will be nothing to forgive.

Saints try to expand the boundaries of our understanding and compassion. They tell us that most people cannot help how they think and behave, because their thinking is conditioned by their past karmas and impressions. Once we understand that everyone is trying to do what they think is best, it becomes so much easier to interact with others without judgement.

Every man’s mind and understanding are conditioned by his own previous karmas, and though he tries to project himself in his best light before others, he thinks and acts according to his karmas. If you do not approve of a person’s thoughts and actions, it does not mean that you should hate him, nor does it entitle you to speak ill of him.

MAHARAJ JAGAT SINGH²⁵²

Another element that sometimes affects harmony in seva is striving for efficiency. At times we may find that discipline and efficiency come in conflict with love, harmony, and teamwork. This conflict occurs not because of the goal of efficiency *per se*, but because we begin to put efficiency above all else. We may think, I have this project to finish by this time, so then we focus

only on the process, the task, of getting the job done in the most efficient way possible. But because of our narrow focus, we may get it done at the cost of love and harmony. While the task is important, seva is never just about the task. Our challenge is to try to achieve both efficiency and harmony – to hold the two in balance.

It is the atmosphere and the spirit of harmony that counts.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁵³

Harmony in seva is often disturbed if we compare ourselves with others – or with the master’s relationship with other sevadars. Some of us may believe that serving the sangat is somehow less of a seva than directly serving the physical master. It is impossible, of course, for everyone to serve the master directly. It doesn’t behove us to covet the jobs of those who serve the master personally or associate with him directly. When we come to seva we can just put on blinkers – not look left or right at anyone else, but straight at our own unique relationship with the master. Whether we serve the master directly, or serve him indirectly by serving the sangat, it amounts to the same thing – we are serving the master.

In a class, there are so many students. Some students need personal attention. Other students are so sharp and intelligent that they grasp everything the teacher is saying and the teacher hardly even looks at them. . . . So everybody has his own place. Some need more attention, some need less; some have different types of seva; and some have different ways of coming near the master. . . . We only see one aspect, not the whole picture.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁵⁴

In seva we learn to focus on what unites us – our love for the master. We learn that teamwork is more precious to the master than the brilliance of any individual sevadar. And we learn that everyone has something they can bring to seva. Baba Ji frequently reminds us that “*saareyaan nu naal lai ke chalna hai*,” which means, “We have to bring everyone along and move forward.”

The master teaches us that each individual has a unique role to play in seva:

A carpenter saws a log into planks of different shapes and sizes and uses them at different places in making a box, some at the bottom, others on the sides, and still others on the top to serve as a lid. Each serves its own purpose. All are chips of the same block.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁵⁵

Ultimately, the only way we can create and sustain a joyful, peaceful atmosphere in seva is if we centre ourselves spiritually. Meditation is the antidote to disharmony. The more we come close to the Shabd within through meditation, the more easily we are able to be inclusive, kind, calm, and non-judgemental. Meditation makes us better sevadars. If, through sheer willpower alone, we were to try to overcome our weaknesses and inculcate the qualities of a good sevadar, we would make little progress. But through meditation, Hazur would often say, these qualities arise in us like cream on milk:

When spirituality – that is, devotion, to Shabd, Nam or the Word – grows within us, all the other good qualities of a human being come in us like cream on milk. We do not have to fight in order to learn or to develop these qualities. They come automatically within us.²⁵⁶

Christ said, “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there in the midst of them.”²⁵⁷ If we could just remember that we are gathering together *in his name*, there would be no disharmony in seva. To gather together in his name is to be conscious that the master is always present with us. In India there is a saying, *maalik ko haazir – naazir samajh ke seva karni chahiye*, which means: Do your seva believing that you are in the master’s presence and are being watched.

We can do this fully only when we dissolve the distinction in our mind between the master’s physical and spiritual presence. It is easy to be loving, kind, and selfless when we are in his presence, but what about when he is not physically there? We don’t want to be humble only in front of him, then arrogant with others when he is not physically present – we want to be kind and loving at all times. If we could do our seva as if he might walk in the door at any moment, would there ever be any disharmony?

We can practise bringing the master with us into seva in many ways. When we begin a particular seva we can quietly remember him. Simran is the best way to do that. When we do our seva with the growing conviction that the master knows our every thought and sees our every action, we will become careful not to say or do anything that would displease him.

Are you sure that I’m not here when I’m not here? If we can just know and understand that we are never alone, that our master is always with us, we are never without him, then the atmosphere would always be the same. We try to tell ourselves that he is not here, when actually he is here.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁵⁸

A woman carrying many bags once entered a bus, sat down next to a man, and kept bumping into him with all her bags.

The man didn't say anything. The woman sitting on the other side of him was offended on his behalf. "Why are you tolerating this?" she whispered. "Why don't you say something to her?"

The man smiled and said, "I get off at the next stop. Our journey together is so short. It is not worth it to make an issue out of this."

When we have disagreements and differences we can stop and ask ourselves: Is this worth making an issue over? *Our journey with our fellow sevadars is also short.* To keep the harmony, we can simply let go of many, many things.

It is true that in seva working with certain people can be challenging, but we can remind ourselves that for some people, working with us can be a challenge, too. Hazur says that such challenges make us aware of where we stand in our own spiritual development and help us grow stronger:

Sister, the real test is to work with a difficult person. Otherwise, everybody likes to work with simple people who don't create any problem. Our real test is when we work and succeed with the most difficult people. Then we know where *we* stand. Then we should not try to find fault with them – they are what they are. The question is how we have to cope with them, how we have to adjust to them.²⁵⁹

It is not for us to change others. We can trust that over time seva will do that. When circumstances are difficult, there are two ways to respond: We can either try to bend the circumstances to our needs, or we can bend ourselves to adjust to the circumstances. When we adjust, we create harmony.

It is impossible to reform another person by trying to set him right according to your way of thinking. But you

can always adjust to his way of thinking. You can always reform yourself.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁶⁰

However, there may be times when in spite of our best efforts we just cannot get along with another sevadar. In such situations, what should we do? We get our answer from a Sufi story.

Mullah Nasruddin decided to start a flower garden. He prepared the soil and planted the seeds of many beautiful flowers. But when they came up, his garden was filled not just with his chosen flowers, but also with weeds. He sought advice from gardeners everywhere and tried every method known to get rid of them, but to no avail. Finally he walked all the way to the capital to speak to the royal gardener at the sheikh's palace. The wise old man had counselled many gardeners before and he suggested a variety of remedies to expel the weeds, but Nasruddin had tried them all. They sat together in silence for some time.

Finally the gardener looked at Nasruddin and said, "Well, then, I suggest you learn to love the weeds."

What a beautiful lesson there is in this for us. Most of us do our best to maintain harmony, and this is no small thing – it requires us to adjust, to yield, to curb our egos. Yet this is not enough. Clearly the master wants more from us. The royal gardener didn't tell Mullah Nasruddin to tolerate the weeds, he told him to learn to *love* the weeds!

But how can we love a fellow sevadar who is arrogant or hurtful? Mystics teach that we don't have to *like* someone to love them. We are all brothers and sisters in our master's spiritual family. In this family, as in all families, there will be people we like and those we don't like, but we don't reject them, we don't ostracize them. We don't stop coming for seva because of them. If we consistently try to *behave* in a loving way with them, over time, genuine love and respect for them can develop within us.

The master's love is the glue that holds us all together. In a beautiful letter to disciples, Great Master urges us to maintain love and harmony in our spiritual family:

With love and humility, forget each other's apparent mistakes or faults, and make due allowance for differences of opinion. Let no one ever try to establish his own opinion or set his own way against the will of the majority. Love and harmony are vastly more important than the opinion of any one. As Jesus said, so long ago, so I now repeat to you: "By this shall all men know that you are my disciples, that you love one another!"

He who forgets this law and injects into the satsang the least element of discord is no longer my disciple in spirit and in love. He is simply a disobedient child. All of you have my unstinted love and blessing, and I hope that the law of love shall be your supreme law and your guiding principle. Remember that one man's opinion is of no importance whatsoever, when set over against the principle of love and harmony. No matter whether any one of you likes anything that is done or not, keep sweet harmony and love, and let the majority govern.²⁶¹

As one sevadar put it so beautifully: "Every sevadar is a small but essential piece of a very big puzzle, and each one of us has a role to play. If one piece is missing the puzzle cannot be completed. As individual puzzle pieces we should stop worrying about whether we are a big piece or a little piece. We can stop worrying about the outcome of our individual seva. When we surrender and fit ourselves into the puzzle, the full image will automatically emerge. And, ultimately, whose image is it? None other than the Supreme."

*Serving with
Mind and Soul*

*aisi deekhiya jan syo manga.
tumhro dhyaan tumhaaro ranga.
tumhri seva tumhaare anga.*

I ask for initiation from your humble servants,
That I may meditate on you,
and love you,
and serve you,
And become part of your being.

GURU ARJAN DEV²⁶²

FIFTEEN

Balance

Whether the body be
 motionless in meditation
 or moving in the thick of life,
Let the mind stay in the middle,
 forever still, pure, and free –
This is a yogi, says Eknath.

EKNATH²⁶³

Sant Mat is a path of balance. Mystics tell us that liberation can be found neither in indulgence nor in renunciation, but in the path between the two. The Buddha referred to this as the Middle Way. Kabir Sahib advocated the path of moderation in his unique metaphorical style: “Too much speaking is not good, nor is too much silence; excess rain is no use, nor is excess sunshine.”²⁶⁴ And Guru Nanak Dev tells us to rejoice because we have been given an opportunity to serve the Lord while we live in this world:

*vich duneeya sev kamaa`eyai.
ta dargeh baisan paa`eyai.
kaho Nanak baah luda`eyai.*

In the midst of this world, do seva,
 And you shall be given a place of honour
 in the court of the Lord.

Says Nanak, thus alone one lives in a state of joy!

GURU NANAK DEV²⁶⁵

Sevadars face the challenge of keeping three things in balance: meditation, worldly life, and seva. Keeping a balance doesn't mean giving equal time and priority to each one. Meditation is clearly our number one priority. We also have to do justice to our worldly life, which includes earning an honest living; fulfilling responsibilities to family, friends, and community; taking care of our health, and occasionally enjoying leisure activities. Physical seva has immeasurable value, but it is something extra that we do, without compromising on meditation and worldly commitments.

There was a sevadar who would do his seva with great efficiency and dedication. His attitude towards seva was soon noticed. One day he was asked by another group of sevadars if he could take on an additional seva with their group. Believing that one should never say 'no' to seva, he accepted it. After some time, his own team leader asked him to work on a new project. The sevadar accepted this task as well. He was sure that if the master had sent him some seva, he would also give him the ability to do it. He got rid of distractions and improved his time-management skills, and soon he was juggling all three tasks and doing an excellent job.

Then he was given a fourth responsibility. The sevadar quietly said, "Of course," and accepted it with folded hands. But this time, although he did all his tasks well, he was pressed for time and began to compromise on meditation – on some days it got done, but on others he used meditation time to complete his physical seva.

Finally his team leader asked him to help out with a complex assignment. The sevadar knew in his heart that he had no capacity to do more, but he couldn't say 'no' to seva. It turned out to be the straw that broke the camel's back; he was completely overwhelmed, and none of the five tasks was getting done properly. He was also neglecting his meditation and family and job responsibilities. In the end he lost his balance and no one was happy with him – not at home, at work, or at seva.

Nothing earthly succeeds by ignoring heaven.
And nothing heavenly succeeds by ignoring earth.

MARCUS AURELIUS²⁶⁶

Some of us make the mistake of taking our seva to an extreme, at the cost of meditation and worldly work. We also may have the misconception that one should never say 'no' to seva. There are circumstances when it may be wise to say 'no' to seva. If we don't have the health or the extra time, or if it would be at the expense of our work or family harmony, then we should say 'no' rather than overextending ourselves and risk losing our balance.

We have to keep a balance in life. . . . You have to discharge certain responsibilities and duties in life. . . . And while doing that, you also do your meditation. You have to keep the balance.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁶⁷

Balance between seva and worldly work

It is not always easy to maintain the delicate balance between seva and worldly work. Sometimes we may get consumed by seva. We may even become 'addicted' to our seva and lose our balance. But if we don't fulfil our responsibilities, we will have

to face the karmic consequences. The master frequently reminds us that positive actions don't cancel out negative ones – positive actions bring their own rewards, and negative actions bring their own consequences.

It's appropriate to ask ourselves: are we using seva as an excuse to escape our worldly responsibilities? Do we believe that seva and meditation are master's work, but worldly work is not? Baba Jaimal Singh once said to the Great Master:

Whatever official or worldly work you do, all is the sat-guru's work.²⁶⁸

So often Baba Ji answers a question with this advice: Be a good human being and serve your parents. He says that even if we were to spend the rest of our lives serving our parents, we would not be able to repay our debt to them.

We are part of a chain, and we have to remain part of that chain. You can't run away from the world. You have certain obligations, certain duties towards some people, towards your country, towards your family, towards your children. You have to discharge all those duties and responsibilities.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁶⁹

If we don't fulfil our responsibilities to our family, they will become unhappy with us. If there is no harmony at home, we won't be able to concentrate at seva or during meditation. And if we cannot meditate properly, what purpose has been served by doing so much seva? Similarly, if we neglect our health because of seva, over time our health will deteriorate and we won't be able either to meditate or to do seva. And if we neglect our job because of seva, we won't be able to earn a proper living, and

that will have its own impact on meditation. So worldly work cannot be neglected. In a letter to a disciple who had lost this delicate balance, Hazur advised:

I understand your emotions and appreciate your one-pointed love for your master. But you have certain commitments and obligations towards others and your family members. . . . Love the master, but give them what is due to them.²⁷⁰

A life of balance means we attend to all our responsibilities, both worldly and spiritual. It also means we should take some time out to relax; life would be very dull and routine otherwise. When the mind is completely suppressed, without some time to relax, it reacts negatively. Each time we cross the line and start to go out of balance, our own conscience speaks up. We should always listen to that inner voice and never ignore it. When we give up control, we give up balance.

Whatever you do, keep your destination and purpose in view. . . . Work in this world, live in this world, and enjoy yourself in this world, but never forget that destination nor leave the path we have to tread in order to get there.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁷¹

Balance between seva and meditation

Physical seva and meditation are both seva, but they are not equivalent or interchangeable. Each seva serves a different purpose and has a different value.

The purpose of physical seva is to help 'clean the vessel,' to create an atmosphere that is conducive to meditation, to make us receptive to the Shabd. If we only work on cleaning the

vessel but never fill it with the nectar of Shabd, the purpose of cleaning the vessel is not achieved.

Seva should help us to meditate... Seva cannot take the place of meditation.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁷²

Sometimes we may do physical seva for hours and hours, then find ourselves tempted to rationalize: I didn't complete my meditation today, but I did all these hours of seva. I was busy with master's work, surely seva will make up for the missed meditation.

But can outer seva ever compensate for inner seva? The goal of our life is to withdraw our attention from the world and from our own body and bring it to the eye centre. To achieve this we have to become absolutely still. But in physical seva there is constant motion, constant talk. How could our goal to go within ever be achieved with physical seva alone? If the busy work of physical seva was all that was necessary to attain liberation, wouldn't our master have given us this shortcut?

If we are doing so much outer seva that we are unable to find the time to meditate, or we are too exhausted to meditate, we might ask ourselves if we have imbibed the master's most basic teaching:

Everything is secondary to bhajan (meditation).

BABA JAIMAL SINGH²⁷³

As we try to balance meditation and seva, there may be times when we swing to extremes. A sevadar once told the master during a question-and-answer session that her seva was disturbing her too much. She said she had to deal with complex

personalities, and it was beginning to affect her concentration in meditation. She asked the master if she should prioritize meditation and give up seva. Baba Ji replied that our attitude makes all the difference. He told her that if she felt she couldn't handle it, it was okay to take a break and then later resume seva. But, he added, if our attitude towards seva is right, then it can never be a hindrance. He asked: Isn't it easier to just change our mindset?

At the other extreme, we may think that – isn't ten or twelve hours a day of seva more than equal to two and a half hours of meditation? Can we not express our love for the master just through our seva? But the master has made it clear: there is a channel through which he gives and through which we receive. Meditation is that channel.

The master has given us four kinds of seva and each one serves a unique purpose. To the extent that our circumstances allow, why reject any one? Why not engage in all four and let the love flow?

*tan man dhan arpi sabho
sagal vaareeyai ih jind.*

I dedicate my body, mind, wealth, and all to him.
I totally sacrifice my soul to him.

GURU ARJAN DEV²⁷⁴

Hazur used to call physical seva an “adornment of meditation.”²⁷⁵ One disciple reminisced about a sevadar who served everyone with great dedication. She recalls: “He did so much, and with such a wonderful attitude, but you couldn't thank him, you couldn't compliment him; the words just bounced off him.” It was as if *he* was not there. This can only come through meditation,” she added. “Such an attitude to seva, such humility, can only come through meditation.”

This anecdote reveals that while seva supports our meditation practice, the reverse is also true – meditation strengthens and deepens our seva. If we were to spend our whole lives doing seva, but didn't pair it with meditation, that seva would be incomplete, its purpose unfulfilled. This is because we can only give to others what we ourselves have, and without the inner connection to love, how much love do we have to give? Meditation fills us with love and happiness, and we bring that joy with us into seva.

You always give what you have. If you are happy within, you will radiate happiness wherever you go. If you are miserable within, you will share misery with others.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁷⁶

At times seva may be both physically and emotionally demanding. Dealing with our own needs and the needs of the sangat, being always on our best behaviour, resolving problems and the occasional conflicts with other sevadars – all this can leave us feeling drained. At such times meditation rejuvenates us and brings us back into balance – it fills us with the power of Shabd. In essence, when we meditate we begin to bring our higher self into seva.

So even if we feel our meditation is inadequate, even if we feel we haven't achieved anything within, if we diligently do our meditation every day, it will give us the strength to keep coming back to our seva with renewed love and energy.

Finding balance

At a practical level, we can consider a two-part approach to keeping a balance between our inner and outer work. First, we can practise keeping our mind focused with consistent daily meditation. Second, we can create a paradigm shift in our attitude towards day-to-day tasks.

With regard to the first approach, Hazur was once asked a question about finding balance, and he replied:

When you are below the eye centre, your mind is your master. When you are above the eye centre, God is your master. To keep a balance in the world, you should hold your attention *at* the eye centre. If you do this and you are attached to the spirit within, you will be able to keep your balance in this world; you will be able to discharge your worldly duties and achieve that goal for which you have taken this human form. That is keeping your balance.²⁷⁷

Meditation is the practice that brings our attention to the eye centre and attaches us to the spirit within. So achieving balance begins with making meditation our priority. Each day we do our meditation for a minimum of two and a half hours and then give time in the day to seva and worldly matters – such focus will ensure that nothing gets neglected.

Different stages of life bring different challenges and opportunities, and each stage calls for a different approach to balance. Up to a certain stage, many of us need to give worldly work priority over seva. Later in life, worldly work eases and seva can get more time. But through it all, our commitment to meditation holds us steady.

In short, meditation is the fulcrum on which our life-balance pivots. Instead of struggling to create balance, we should simply prioritize meditation. Meditation then will keep us from swinging to extremes, and the balance between seva and worldly work will automatically follow. Only meditation has the power to centre and anchor us:

Well, sister, if you are tied to a strong chain, you can move only within a limited area. So if we are tied to our

meditation every day, no matter how much we're involved in other things, we will always remain within the circle – we will not be able to get out of the circle. If the chain is broken, then of course you are absolutely gone, you're involved. So the chain of meditation should not be broken.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁷⁸

The second part of our quest for balance is to shift our perspective on day-to-day work. If we think of meditation, physical seva, and worldly work as three *separate* streams of activity, we are likely to experience dissonance – a tension between the inward focus of meditation and the outward focus of seva and worldly work. And we may swing between extremes as we try to keep them in balance.

But the master doesn't see a separation between the mundane and spiritual, and he encourages us to shift the lens through which we view our life as a whole. One of the themes that weaves through Baba Jaimal Singh's letters to Maharaj Sawan Singh is that both inner and outer work are the master's work:

All work is his work; remain happy wherever he keeps you, and take on whatever work you do as the satguru's work.²⁷⁹

When we view life through this lens – that *all* work is his work – we discover a paradigm shift in our attitude towards everyday tasks. When we approach every task as the master's work, it automatically becomes seva.

Hazur was once asked if there was a way to approach worldly tasks as a form of seva, and he responded:

If you keep the Lord and the master in your mind for all twenty-four hours, whatever you do is seva.²⁸⁰

The caveat is the word ‘if.’ If we put aside our ego and act as his agent, if we keep the Lord and master in our mind when we do our work, then it’s possible to live a spiritual life not just for two or three hours of the day when we meditate, but also while we engage in worldly activity.

We can picture our daily life as two nested spheres – spiritual work is the inner sphere, while seva and worldly work form the outer sphere that surrounds it. Both spheres coexist simultaneously, as an interconnected whole, and we weave in and out of them throughout the day. The master’s presence then radiates from the inner sphere into everything we do in the outer sphere, and this is what gives us equilibrium.

In *The Practice of the Presence of God*, the author describes how the monk Brother Lawrence meditated regularly, then brought that prayerful attitude into his life and seva, suffusing his daily activities with a deep spiritual ambience. As a result, he was able to connect with the Lord as much during mundane tasks as during meditation. The author says:

He believed that it was a great mistake to think that the time of prayer should be different from other times. We should be just as close to God when we are involved in our daily activities, just as our prayer unites us with him in our quiet time.²⁸¹

Similarly, a close associate describes Sardar Bahadur Ji’s attitude towards the activities of his life: “Everything he did, all his duties, whether spiritual or temporal, were all done in the master’s name. When we were young, he repeatedly advised us after initiation that whatever we did – whether it was our simran and bhajan, or whether we were studying for an examination or doing any kind of official work – we should do it in the name of the master or for the master. It must be regarded as

the master's work and not our own. If we regarded any duty as the master's work, we could not but do it with the fullest love and devotion, and therefore to the very best of our ability. And this was the way he did it."²⁸²

When the satguru is remembered with love, all spiritual and worldly work becomes pleasing and the mind does not feel any distress. Then even worldly activities yield spiritual fruit.

BABA JAIMAL SINGH²⁸³

From all of this, a clear theme emerges: there is no line that separates our outer and inner work. In fact, the master uses our seva and worldly tasks as the *vehicle* for revealing deep spiritual insights.

As our understanding of its potential expands, we begin to realize that seva embraces everything: physical seva is seva; meditation is seva; and when we learn to infuse our worldly work with seva of the mind – doing it as master's work and with the right attitude – then our worldly work becomes seva as well. Slowly, our life becomes a life of service.

Over time, the inner and outer aspects of our life begin to merge, and we forget to distinguish between them. Hazur often referred to *all* of it as meditation – not just the two and a half hours, but all of it:

Meditation is a way of life. You do not merely close yourself in a room for a few hours, then forget about meditation for the rest of the day. It must take on a practical form, reflecting in every daily action and in your whole routine. . . . Everything you do must consciously prepare you for the next meditation. So meditation becomes a way of life, as we live in the atmosphere we build with meditation.²⁸⁴

From the mystics we learn this amazing truth: if we lead a balanced life, then even as we engage fully with this world we can attain liberation:

*hasandiya khelandiya
painandiya khaavandiya
viche hovai mukat.*

While laughing, playing, dressing, and eating,
one is liberated.

GURU ARJAN DEV²⁸⁵

Like everything else on the inner way, balance comes slowly. Through trial and error, through meditation, through living life, through carefully observing how the master lives his own life – slowly we learn the delicate art of balance.

Observe these two qualities –
contraction and expansion –
in the fingers of your hand:
Assuredly, after the closing of
the fist comes the opening.
If your fingers were always closed
or always open, you would be afflicted.
Your work and action are regulated
by these two qualities.
These two conditions are as important for you
as the bird's wings to the bird.

RUMI²⁸⁶

Rumi explains that balance means understanding the ups and downs of life as a necessary part of the whole. He says that if the hand were to swing to either extreme – always open or always closed – it would be paralyzed. The hand can only get

things done by opening and closing over and over again. The hand doesn't think it is juggling tasks, some welcome, others not. It just does what is needed when it's needed. The same is true with the movement of the wings of a bird. For the bird to fly, the wings must be alternately spread and gathered in. This change from one activity to the next and from one state to its opposite is natural and essential. Being aware that life involves such alternation – of work and rest, comfort and discomfort, joy and sorrow – is critical to keeping our balance.

The master epitomizes this state of balance, this state of effortless effort. With conscious practice, perhaps the day will come when we too can move seamlessly from meditation to seva, from seva to a worldly activity, and from a worldly activity back to meditation, giving each task our complete awareness – our deepest presence – until it is time to move effortlessly and naturally to the next task.

If body, mind, and soul operate in harmony and balance,
the result is peace, happiness, and an ideal life.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁸⁷

SIXTEEN

Meditation

*saacha saahib saach naaye bhaakhiya bhaaò apaar.
aakhah mangah deh deh daat kare daataar.
fer ke agai rakheeyai jit disai darbaar.
muhau ke bolan boleeyai jit sun dhare pyaar.
amrit vela sach naaò vadiyaa'i veechaar.*

True is the master, true is his Nam –
repeat it with infinite love.
People beg and pray, “Give to us, give to us,”
and the great giver gives his gifts.
So what offering can we place before him,
by which we might see his court?
What words can we speak to evoke his love?
In the ambrosial hours before dawn,
repeat the true Nam,
and contemplate his glorious greatness.

GURU NANAK DEV²⁸⁸

*H*ow fortunate we are to have come into the shelter of a true master! How fortunate we are if we have been blessed with the opportunity to sit in quiet remembrance and offer our love. Mystics tell us that this is the highest form of service and the one most precious to the Lord.

Meditation is not just an activity we do now and then; it is a lifelong process of bending the mind towards love:

Potentially every soul is God. But we have to become God; we have to go to that level of consciousness. Potentially every drop is the ocean, but it has to evaporate and become the cloud and the rain before it can be one with the ocean.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁸⁹

No matter how much the drop yearns to be one with the ocean, it cannot directly reach the ocean. There is a process involved. It must slip out from under the rock and submit itself to the heat of the sun. This is all that is required of it – simply to turn its attention towards the sun and become receptive. The sun does the rest – separating it from the dirt and impurity, raising it to the clouds, then letting it drop and merge into the ocean. When we meditate, this is what we do – we make ourselves receptive to the process. The master does the rest.

Through meditation we become worthy of his grace and receptive to his love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁹⁰

No physical action can replace the role of meditation in this process, because the one with whom we wish to merge is not physical:

The master is not the body, he is the Shabd within. How would you merge in that without meditation?

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁹¹

Since the destination is not physical, the body has no role to play in meditation except to not distract the mind. Therefore

during meditation the body is brought to a state of absolute stillness. Mind, on the other hand, has the primary role in the process. Meditation is the practice of turning the mind inward and bringing it to stillness as well. The biblical psalmist sang, “Be still, and know that I am God.”²⁹² With a still body and mind, our attention withdraws from the world of the senses and becomes receptive to the power of the Shabd reverberating within us, and our soul is free to rise:

The natural tendency of the soul is to rise up, for it is a bird of a different sphere. The mind and the body keep it down. The cream in milk automatically rises when the milk is left alone. The moment the body and the mind are stationary, the soul begins to rise up towards the focus.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH²⁹³

Everything we do in meditation is *for* the mind. The soul already loves; it is the mind that is learning how to love:

You see, actually this meditation, this love that we’re trying to develop is for the mind. . . . When the mind goes to its own source, automatically the soul goes to the Father, because it is already filled with love for the Father. . . . So all our efforts in meditation are for creating our love, devotion, faith – it is all for the mind.²⁹⁴

Paradoxically, however, meditation is also done *by* the mind. Meditation is where *seva* of the mind finds its highest expression. A seeker once wrote to Great Master asking what method he had worked out to go within. Great Master replied:

I took instructions from my own guru and he gave me the exact method. That method is the same as all saints use,

which is simply the concentrated attention held firmly at the given centre. . . . It is all a matter of *unwavering attention*. Every ray of attention must be centred there and held there.²⁹⁵

This is the essence of the meditative process – to uproot every ray of our attention from the physical world and transplant it in the inner world; to refocus the mind within, then hold it still at the “given centre.” This very method of meditation has been taught to us by our master, and it has three components: simran, dhyan, and bhajan.

Simran, the practice of silent repetition of five names given by the master at the time of initiation, draws our attention out of this world and up to the eye centre. Dhyan, the practice of contemplating on the form of the master, holds our attention steady at the eye centre. Simran and dhyan are done simultaneously; they help focus the mind and bring it to stillness, so it can attune to the Shabd resounding at the eye centre. Then, through the practice of bhajan, we listen to the divine melody of the Shabd and respond to its inward pull.

But the Shabd doesn't pull the soul-consciousness until *every* ray of attention has collected at the eye centre, and to achieve this, the discipline of simran is essential. Hazur explains the deep relationship between simran and bhajan:

Unless you come to the eye centre, you cannot be in touch with the Shabd within, and unless you are in touch with the Shabd within, it will not pull you upward. If you want a magnet to pull a needle, you have to bring the needle into the range of that magnet, from where it can then pull. . . . Simran is the means of withdrawing the consciousness to the eye centre, and then the Shabd pulls the consciousness upward.²⁹⁶

Regular meditation, practised daily for at least one tenth of the day, in the privacy of our home and the intimacy of our heart, is our first and foremost service – our “real” seva:

Seva means that service which is done to please the master, and what pleases the master most is when we attend to our meditation. Withdrawing our consciousness to the eye centre and connecting it with the sound is the real seva.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH²⁹⁷

Seva of the mind

Seva of the mind, known as *man seva*, plays a critical role throughout the meditative process. First, it is the bridge that connects outer seva with inner seva. Seva with body and wealth, when infused with seva of the mind, prepares us for meditation; it softens the ego and makes us humble, fills us with love and longing for the master, and creates within us the desire – the intention – to meditate.

Secondly, seva of the mind builds our resolve to sit in meditation – it converts this intention into action. Seva of the mind is what brings us to the meditation seat every day, keeps us there for the full time, helps us sit still and repeat the names, and helps us stay still and listen within.

Finally, seva of the mind helps us slowly dissolve negative attitudes towards meditation – analysis, expectation, judgement, frustration, comparison, worry, and fear – and instead approach meditation with positive attitudes such as humility, surrender, and selflessness.

Hazur suggests a beautiful attitude of exploration and openness on the inner journey:

To have success in meditation, the aspirant must enter upon it with the determination to explore its possibilities.

He must not start with reservations, but should be willing to go where he is led, but without expectations. The essence of meditation is one-pointedness to merge in the Shabd to the exclusion of all other thoughts even when they happen to be enticing.²⁹⁸

Clearly, *how* we approach our meditation seva matters. We can choose to meditate reluctantly, or we can meditate with positivity and joy. The attitudes we choose will yield different results. So the role of mind seva in meditation – creating the resolve to sit and elevating the attitude with which we sit – is worth a deeper exploration.

The resolve to sit

Initiation by a true master is an event of unfathomable significance. Hazur says:

This initiation is not just some ceremony. The Lord has made you his own. He has chosen you for eternal liberation and wishes you to come back to him.²⁹⁹

We serve with the mind when we approach meditation with an awareness of the magnitude of the gift we've been given and when we bring to our inner seva some of the same qualities we develop and hone in outer seva – responsibility, dedication, self-discipline, obedience, and the determination to truly listen.

To meditate with responsibility is to be aware that when we were initiated we made a solemn commitment to the master, and it is up to us now to honour this commitment, every day, for the rest of our lives. It is true that at the time of initiation the master also makes a commitment – to take our soul back to the Lord. And the master will keep his commitment; as Great Master used to say, there are no failures in Sant Mat. But this

doesn't mean we have nothing to do or that the master will do it for us. Hazur clarifies that Great Master's assurance is contingent on our effort:

Failure means that I have done my best to attend to meditation but I couldn't succeed. Failure doesn't mean that I never attended to meditation. That is not failure. That is not even attempting.³⁰⁰

We cannot abdicate our responsibility because we believe the master will fulfil his. The master's responsibility is completely different from the disciple's, and Great Master beautifully explains the difference:

It is the business and duty of every disciple to make his mind motionless and reach the eye centre. The duty of the master is to help and guide on the path. . . . The primary factor in this success is the effort of the disciple. . . . The master teaches and the disciple learns. The progress of the disciple depends upon how fast he learns his lessons. The efforts of the disciple and the grace of the master go hand in hand.³⁰¹

The master often tells us that a teacher can teach a child but cannot study or learn for the child. He says that someone can cook a meal, place it before us, and even feed it to us; but they cannot digest it for us. The same is true on the spiritual path – we have a role to play in our own liberation.

Serving with responsibility is not just about having a broad understanding of the commitment we've made; it is also about the micro-level choices we make on a daily basis. Kabir Sahib once observed an ant carrying a grain of rice. Along the way it spied a lentil, and it seemed puzzled how to carry both. Kabir

said it couldn't carry both; it would have to make a choice to drop one and take the other. In the same way, said Kabir, a spiritual practitioner will have to choose between the Lord and the world.³⁰²

With every action we take a step either towards or away from God. The default setting of the mind is to move outward, so choosing to redirect the mind inward takes effort, sometimes tremendous effort. Tiny though it may seem to us, mystics emphasize the great significance of our effort:

Whoever believes he can reach God
by his own efforts toils in vain;
Whoever believes he can reach God without effort
is merely a traveller on the road of intent.

ABU SA'ID AL-KHARRAZ³⁰³

This brings us to the power of self-discipline and obedience. Between intention and action there is a gap, and *seva* of the mind bridges that gap. We often say that our lives are too busy, that we don't have the time to meditate. But the master reminds us that twenty-four hours in the day is sufficient time to work, sleep, fulfil our obligations, *and* meditate. We often say that we will meditate when our circumstances get better, but the master tells us that when circumstances get better we will feel no need to meditate; the need to meditate is now, when circumstances are not good.

Our master asks us to think deeply about what we want from life, because sooner or later whatever we put our effort into we will surely get. We may think we love the master, but our actions reflect what we truly love. We are always able to find time to do the things that are important to us, so if we struggle to find time to meditate, the issue may not be a lack of time, but our priorities.

Emphasizing the need to make meditation our highest priority, Great Master said, “This done, all is done; this not done, all else done is as if nothing is done.”³⁰⁴ And Baba Ji, quoting Guru Nanak Dev, reminds us frequently that to connect with Nam is an initiate’s highest privilege and greatest responsibility:

*eko naam hukam hai nanak
satguru deeya bujhaaye jeeò.*

The one Nam is the Lord’s command.
O Nanak, the true guru has given me this
understanding.

GURU NANAK DEV³⁰⁵

Love means obedience, and obedience involves sacrifice. We don’t *have* the time to meditate, we *make* the time for it – by making sacrifices on other fronts. Hazur says:

The time we give to meditation is a sacrifice. . . . We have to abstain from society so that we can give our time, adjust our time for meditation. We shun certain company which we don’t relish anymore, which we don’t like anymore, which distracts us from the Father, which pulls us, which is slippery. This is the type of sacrifice we have to make.³⁰⁶

The mind likes to run in familiar grooves, and when we try to train it to do something new it will make excuses: I don’t have the time; I have too many responsibilities; I’m in physical pain; I just *can’t* do it; I’m making no progress; it’s too dry; I can’t concentrate; I don’t feel the ‘pull’ to do it; the master will do it for me anyway; when he *wants* me to do it, he will *make* me do it; or, I’ll definitely do it, but I’ll start tomorrow.

Let us recognize these thoughts for what they are – excuses of the mind – and gently but relentlessly redirect the mind

towards the master. We remind ourselves that we simply cannot afford to compromise with what is most important to us. We may be able to postpone other things, but we can't postpone love; we love the master and want to remember him – today.

Hazur often said that if the mind is in your control, you can't have a better friend, and if the mind is not in your control, you can't have a worse enemy. To help tame the mind, we can choose to exert the self-discipline and obedience it takes to make meditation a habit. This habit then creates a powerful new groove for the mind to run in, and slowly the excuses stop. The power of habit is why we are urged to be regular and punctual – to fix a time for meditation and keep the commitment.

Hazur would say that whether the mind takes to it or not, we should sit, considering it to be our duty. This is the discipline of love. When all is said and done, the only thing the master really asks of us in meditation is to have the self-discipline to show up and do our best. And we do this not for anyone else, but for ourselves. This is a commitment we've made to our own soul.

When asked once if there is a penalty for not meditating, Hazur replied:

The penalty is that you have missed the opportunity. There are no penalties in Sant Mat. . . . There are no penalties in the way of love. We have missed the opportunity. What greater penalty can there be?³⁰⁷

Seva of the mind includes the mental resolve to practise not only simran and dhyan, but also bhajan – to listen within, even if we cannot yet hear the divine melody. It is during bhajan that we do the great work of life, developing the ability to hear within:

eha seva chaakri naam vasai man aaye.

This alone is the service of the Lord
by which his Nam dwells in you.

GURU AMAR DAS³⁰⁸

The mind is powerful, however, and prefers to take the easier way whenever possible. So when we are unable to hear the Shabd within, we may be tempted to skip the bhajan part of our practice. We may tell ourselves that when we achieve some measure of concentration through simran and dhyān, *then* we will sit in bhajan. But if we do this we may miss the whole point of the spiritual practice! Everything else we do on the path – darshan, satsang, seva, and even simran and dhyān – these are all means to one end. The ultimate goal is *surat shabd seva* – the seva of connecting the soul with the Shabd – and this happens during bhajan. So if we do everything else, but don't sit in bhajan, it's like running a race every day but always stopping just before the finish line and saying, "I'm done!"

The master tells us that if we want to get the full benefit of simran, we have to complete it with bhajan. Otherwise it's like cooking a meal over and over again, but never eating it. He tells us to make a habit of sitting in bhajan, just like a shopkeeper opens his shop. Whether customers come or not, every day the shopkeeper opens the shop.

The ultimate seva of the mind is to approach meditation with the resolve to listen within – never to treat our bhajan practice casually. To sit in bhajan when we can hear the Shabd is easy to do, because the divine melody is so sweet it holds our attention. But to sit when we cannot hear anything within is not so easy. This is where seva of the mind comes in.

We begin the practice of meditation with the support of attitudes like responsibility, dedication, self-discipline, obedience, and the resolve to listen within. And we continue in this way

until the Shabd takes over and seva of the mind is no longer needed. Eventually the day will come when we cannot imagine our existence without this vital connection with the Shabd:

*mere preetama hau jeeva naam dhyaaye.
bin naavai jeevan na theeyai mere satgur
naam drirraaye.*

O my beloved! I live by meditating on your Nam.
Without your Nam, my life does not even exist.
My true guru has implanted your Nam within me.

GURU RAM DAS³⁰⁹

Most of us evolve slowly to this stage, but we can rest assured that even if we don't yet hear the inner melody, our daily effort to listen to the Shabd doesn't go unnoticed by the Beloved.

Also, while we may not yet be able to hear the inner melody during bhajan, this doesn't mean that the Shabd is not doing its part. In the silence and darkness, that primal power is cleansing and stilling us, detaching us from this world, slowly making us worthy of the Lord. The silence of bhajan is no ordinary silence.

Is it not immense good fortune that while living our ordinary, noisy, hectic lives, we have the opportunity to sit in silence and connect with the divine power that created and sustains the entire creation? Ultimately, what is Shabd if not the hand of God reaching out for us?

The astonishing fact is that when we do simran and dhyān, we reach for the hand of God. And when we do bhajan, we touch the hand of God.

The attitude with which we sit

While the *resolve* to sit in meditation is our primary mind seva, we can further enhance our practice when we also inculcate an open, accepting, and positive mindset towards meditation.

Seva with the mind involves consciously cultivating attitudes that nurture and elevate our meditation practice. Before we explore some of these attitudes, however, it is worth noting that they represent ideal qualities. The master knows that we are struggling souls. Even if we are not able to bring these qualities well or consistently to our meditation practice, he accepts our every effort, because he knows that over time these qualities will automatically emerge in our nature.

Humility, simplicity, and surrender

True humility is an outcome of meditation, and this quality takes time to develop. But even now we can approach meditation with a deeper awareness of where our spiritual effort stands in the big picture.

We begin with the awareness that we've been given the gift of meditation not because we are such good human beings that we are worthy of it, but simply because of grace:

If we look within ourselves and think we have become worthy, we never become worthy. We have been here in this creation for generations and generations, and we have been collecting so many karmas every time we have been here. If we must account for all those karmas, it will be impossible to become worthy of the Lord. . . . So what we need is the Lord's grace, his forgiveness, nothing else.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³¹⁰

Even if we have been doing our meditation with great diligence, what credit can we take for it? Hazur says: "'I' only comes when we don't do it. When we truly meditate, then 'I' just disappears. . . . Then we know our insignificance."³¹¹ If we think, *I* am sitting in meditation, or *I* have never missed a day of meditation, then, even if we don't express the thought to anyone, our ego becomes an obstacle:

You see, we have limited free will, but we should attend to meditation without thinking that I am doing it, I am achieving it. Then there is always a danger of building ego. That ego, even spiritual ego, will be in our way.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³¹²

Even if we have been doing our meditation with great diligence, it doesn't have the power to liberate us. Hazur once asked, "Do you think your meditation is taking you up? Nobody's meditation is taking him up to the Father... It is the Father himself, through the master, who is taking us back to the Father."³¹³ Nevertheless our meditation is essential, because it is a heartfelt cry to the Lord for help. With meditation we are knocking at the door – over and over again. Without our knocking the door won't open, so knocking is vital. But putting even this into perspective, Hazur says that if the Lord didn't first will it, we would never be able to knock:

Unless the Lord wishes, we can never think about him... We think we are loving the Lord, we think we are finding the Lord. Actually he is the one who's pulling us from within, giving us facilities, opportunities, environments, creating all that atmosphere within us... So it is a gift given to us by him.³¹⁴

Once we realize how truly limited we are, we begin to see why the master has kept our responsibility so simple. Baba Ji tells us that all we have to do is sit down, close our eyes, start our simran, and let go. Can it really be that easy? It is said that meditation is simple, but it feels complicated because it goes through *us*:

Meditation is really very simple. We complicate it. We weave a web of ideas around it – what it is and what it is

not. But it is none of these things. Because it is so very simple it escapes us, because our minds are so complicated, so time-worn, and time-based.

KRISHNAMURTI³¹⁵

Saints invite us to approach meditation with the innocence, simplicity, and wonder of a child. A child leaps joyously off a table into her father's arms – no doubts, no questions, no fear that she won't be caught. We too can let go – and approach meditation with the mindset that we are here to surrender our ego to the One we love.

Each time a thought arises in meditation, we may notice that we seem to be the main character in every scene we conjure up. So each time we let go of that thought and return our mind to simran, we are letting go of 'I' and replacing it with 'You.' Over time, we focus our attention more and more on the Beloved, until eventually our self – our 'I' – dies from lack of attention. This is how, bit by bit, we surrender our ego in meditation.

We may experience a natural fear – of surrendering to the darkness within, of facing the unknown – but we can remind the mind that we are always protected by the master:

Whenever a disciple sits in meditation, he's never alone. He's *never* alone, and he's never allowed to go astray within. There is always a guiding hand, a guiding force, to lead the disciple within. . . . The one for whom we are meditating is always there with us to guide us, and we shouldn't ever worry or feel fear at all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³¹⁶

We may also fear merging with God – losing control, losing our own identity. But the master tells us that when we grasp

that Oneness we achieve something far greater than we could with our limited I-ness.

When by giving we can become God, what else is left? If by giving yourself – as a drop you become an ocean – have you gained or lost? If in losing your own identity you become the Father, have you gained or have you lost?

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³¹⁷

Harmony

Harmony usually applies to having loving, peaceful relationships with others, but it is equally important to be in harmony with ourselves. When we analyze and judge the quality of our meditation, we create a state of dissatisfaction and disharmony in our mind.

We have an expectation that we should be able to create an unbroken flow of simran, because all the mystics have urged us to do this. Sardar Bahadur Ji says that simran “should be incessant, unceasing, continuous, and constant.”³¹⁸ And Great Master says:

We have to practice simran so assiduously that, even while talking, it should continue to roll on its course. The five holy names must spin ceaselessly around their axis. Sitting, standing, walking, eating, awake or asleep, the repetition must go on.³¹⁹

When we find ourselves unable to achieve such a high level of concentration, we feel frustrated. But we can remind ourselves that the saints are presenting the ideal, the ultimate goal. We don't *begin* with concentration – we end with it. It takes the practice of a lifetime to achieve ceaseless simran.

For now, each time the mind runs out, we can gently and calmly bring it back to the darkness within and restart our

simran – without analysis or judgement. If we give in to guilt, anger, or impatience when the mind slips away from the words, we create a negative association with them. Instead, each time we bring the mind back and remember simran again we can feel joy over this small victory. And we can be thankful to the master, because who but the master actually brings our mind back to the words? Such an attitude builds a positive association with the words.

There may be times when we are able to achieve a degree of concentration but then are not able to hold on to it. When it slips away we might feel disheartened; we might feel we have lost what we had gained. But the master assures us that the Lord doesn't give a gift, then take it away. At this stage there are natural ups and downs in our ability to concentrate because the karmas we go through in life distract the mind.

When we do achieve a certain degree of concentration, we may get excited and start analyzing: What am I seeing, what am I hearing? The master explains that the moment we start thinking, the mind gets engaged and the attention falls again. He urges us to stop analyzing and simply enjoy the experience, whatever it may be. Then the mind will cherish meditation more and more.

When we struggle to concentrate, we might be tempted to compare our progress with that of others, but this doesn't benefit us either. In truth, we cannot gauge our own progress, let alone that of anyone else. Our rate of progress on the spiritual path depends on many factors – karmas, attachments, efforts – and these are unique to each person. Of these factors, we can only really see our own effort. So we can forget about everyone else, and just focus on our own effort.

You have seen moths. The moth is in love with the light, and there are a thousand moths on that light. Ask that

moth if he knows any other moth there. He knows only one thing: the light he's in love with. He's not conscious of any other moth – and if he's conscious of the other moths, he is not a moth at all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³²⁰

We tend to analyze not only simran, but dhyān and bhajan as well; we worry about our inability to see the inner form of the master and to hear the inner sound. The master puts our concern into perspective. He says that we cannot do dhyān, and we cannot do bhajan; the only thing we can actually do is simran. It simply means that in dhyān, when we try to visualize the inner form of the master, we may not be able to see the inner form because that is the fruit of concentrated simran. It will come to us automatically when we are ready. And when we sit in bhajan, we may not yet be able to hear the Shabd within, because that is also the fruit of concentrated simran.

So the master clearly separates our effort – simran, dhyān, and bhajan – from the fruit of the effort, which are the visible signs of progress. Seva of the mind involves remembering this distinction and simply focusing on the effort.

If we are unable to listen *to* the Shabd, we can listen *attentively for* the Shabd. And if we are unable to see the inner form of the master, we can simply gaze attentively into the darkness at the eye centre and do our simran, feeling that we are in his presence. Being present in the darkness is no small achievement. That darkness is not nothing; it is our first step on the journey within. Hazur often reminded us that when we gaze into the darkness, we are exactly where we need to be:

When you close your eyes, you are here in the centre of the darkness in the forehead, and being there, you do the simran. You also feel that your master is there and that

you are there in the darkness and you are doing simran in the presence of the master.³²¹

When we make every effort without analyzing the quality of our ‘performance,’ we can find simple joy and inner harmony in the practice. Ultimately it is not the quality on any particular day that matters; it is the sum total of our efforts – the sheer determination to never give up – that eventually turns the tide of the mind inward. Hazur assured us that “quality will come with quantity.”³²² When the master does not judge the quality of our meditation, we need not judge ourselves.

Hazur only emphasized that we need to attend to our meditation. There is such sweetness in the simplicity of this request. To ‘attend’ just means to be present. All we have to do is show up and do our best to stay attentive.

What is in our hands today is simran. When we realize that these words are precious jewels, we don’t take them for granted. The words we repeat are not just words – they are infused with the power of the true master. Great Master says these words are ‘energy-charged’ and help the transference of spiritual energy to the disciple.³²³ When we repeat these words they don’t just disappear into the ether; each word is heard, registered, and added to our credit. Repetition of simran is the process of becoming pure love.

Concentration is the next step. Concentration is about threading the words into an unbroken chain. But well before we reach this goal, we can take delight right now in the practice of gathering up those jewels and *trying* to thread them. They scatter, and we gather them up again, and again, and again. The more we practise the easier it becomes to gather and thread them. Even if they scatter a million times, so what? There is joy in simply sitting amongst the precious jewels, playing with them, threading them for the master.

ratan laal amol amolak satgur seva leejai.

The most precious and priceless gems and jewels
are obtained by serving the true guru.

GURU RAM DAS³²⁴

Balance and detachment

We need to keep a balanced frame of mind towards meditation. We may nurture the hope that if we meditate all hours of the day and night we might be able to speed up our spiritual progress, but Hazur cautions that too much meditation when we are not spiritually ready can cause the mind to react:

Sometimes people just try to close themselves off in a room and don't want to lead a natural, normal adult life. They try to meditate all day and the mind reacts, and they lose their balance. . . . Meditation is a slow process. That is why it is known as *sahaj marg* [the natural way]. You have to be part of the world and also attend to meditation. You cannot fight with your mind day and night. You also have to divert it into worldly affairs, and then bring it back to meditation. . . . We have to lead a normal human life.³²⁵

We are to live in this world and engage with it, but at the same time, when we meditate we are to hold all thoughts of this world at bay. This is quite a challenge. Cultivating a sense of detachment towards the thoughts that assail us during meditation helps, and the masters have given some practical suggestions on how to do this.

Baba Ji likens the thoughts that arise during meditation to files that have been uploaded in the mind over lifetimes. He tells us that each time such a file is downloaded during meditation, we are simply to press the delete button – by doing simran. If we start scrolling and become absorbed in the file instead of

deleting it, then we will go in the direction the file takes us. The purpose of simran is to erase these files, these endless thoughts.

In a letter to a disciple, Hazur shares this advice: “If thoughts go out too much or seem to rush in from all sides at the time of bhajan and simran, gently push them aside, reason, and say firmly, We’ll discuss these things after meditation.”³²⁶

When we are sitting in meditation, we should think that we have no connection with anybody else in the world except this darkness in the forehead. We should cut off from everything in the world and just be in the darkness... Automatically this darkness will change into light.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³²⁷

Do we really have the capacity to cut off from everything in the world – to detach our attention at will? In fact, we do. This is an innate ability of the mind that can be developed with practice. Each time we sleep, for instance, we disconnect from our desires, worries, and cares. And nothing is lost, nothing is forgotten. When we wake up, we pick up from wherever we left off. So we can reason with our mind that, in much the same way, the thoughts that plague us during meditation can wait for a little while:

Man has the capacity to detach himself from the world and its objects. We are detached from it daily when we go to sleep. In shorter periods, we get detached frequently. When we give up one thought and take up another, we have passed through the gate of detachment; only the duration was small. This duration can be prolonged at will. Of course this requires practice.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³²⁸

Worldly thoughts aside, even the desire to see something within scatters the mind. Hazur says, “When you are anticipating or when you are excited about it, it does not come at all, because then the mind is not actually concentrated but is scattered in excitement.”³²⁹ The master advises us to sit in meditation with a detached and relaxed attitude, with no preconceived notions and no excitement. Hazur would reset our expectations, saying, “It comes when you least expect it.”³³⁰

We should never sit in meditation with any excitement or with longing to see something at once, for then the mind gets frustrated and runs out. We should attend to meditation with an absolutely relaxed mind and just do our duty. When it comes, it just comes. Our excitement or our anxiety does not bring anything. It is the concentration that brings it; concentration with love and longing and his grace bring it. So when it has to come, it comes automatically.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³³¹

Love

Hazur would often say that meditation is the only way to grow and strengthen our love. As a result, we tend to think of love as an *outcome* of meditation. But at the same time he would also say that we should meditate *with* love and devotion. Hazur’s advice to meditate with love has given rise to many questions over the years, perhaps because we judge our own meditation and perceive it to be mechanical, dry, and barren. It doesn’t at all feel like the worldly love with which we are familiar, and it makes us wonder if we are meditating with enough – or any – love.

Hazur responded to someone concerned about doing ‘mechanical’ simran, not feeling love and devotion while repeating the words:

Brother, first we have to start mechanically. Attending to simran with love and devotion means love and devotion for the master.³³²

To someone else concerned about not feeling adequate love during meditation, Hazur clarified that “Meditation is nothing *but* love.”³³³ This means that the act of meditating is itself an act of love – the practice, not the ‘success’ of our efforts, is love.

If we were to keep in mind Hazur’s definition – *love means obedience* – we wouldn’t worry about approaching meditation with enough love. Simply giving time to the master in meditation is love. And when we give him the whole of our attention in meditation, that is the highest form of love. Someone asked Hazur, “Could you explain to me about doing simran with love and devotion? To me these are just words, and I don’t understand what they mean.” Hazur replied:

Put your whole mind in these words; you will automatically feel the love and devotion. Let no other thought come in your mind. Let the whole of yourself, the whole of your mind, be in the simran. Love comes automatically.³³⁴

Much of the battle to give the master our attention *during* meditation is fought *outside* of meditation. If our attention is distracted and scattered throughout the day, then naturally it will be distracted and scattered during meditation. Great Master puts it simply: “Thoughts of the external world keep the attention out, and thoughts of the internal world keep it in.”³³⁵

Seva of the mind is about forgetting and remembering – forgetting the world and remembering the master. If we serve with the mind throughout the day – filling our mind in free moments with simran, satsang, and seva – it becomes much easier to bring our attention to the eye centre during meditation.

The more we remember the master throughout the day, the more love we will bring to our meditation.

If your master is within you, if you're always surrounded with love and devotion for the Father, then whatever you do in this world, it's all meditation, it is all seva. . . . He should reflect in your every activity, your every word. Then every breath is meditation.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³³⁶

In essence, regardless of whether we have been able to achieve focused attention or any visible signs of progress during meditation, our ongoing *effort* to forget the world and remember the beloved *is* love.

Selflessness, patience, perseverance, and acceptance

We are conditioned by the world to expect that when we put in a certain amount of effort we will get a proportionate result. So when we meditate we expect to see some form of spiritual progress. If, instead, we find ourselves meditating in silence and darkness year after year, we may assume we are not making progress and feel disappointed. But Hazur says: "A lover is never discouraged because he's in love with the Being, and he's concerned only with his love."³³⁷

The root cause of our disappointment is expectation – we want something in return for our effort, some visible signs of progress. But the master urges us to meditate selflessly – without any desire:

Many people practise simran, but all credit and all glory to him who practises simran without any desire.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³³⁸

We don't knock at the door because we want gifts from the giver; we knock because we are in love with the giver. If we demand spiritual progress – even if we frame it as begging – we are in effect saying to the master: I am doing my job, why aren't you doing yours?

A beggar comes to your door to ask you for alms, but first he wants to be assured that he is going to get something from the house before knocking at the door. Otherwise, he is not going to beg. This is a wrong attitude... I assure you, if we really beg from our heart, he is always ready to give. If we come one step, he comes ten steps to receive us. But our devotion must be pure... We have to love him for his sake.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³³⁹

Hazur assures us: "Progress is always there even though we are not conscious of it."³⁴⁰ This means we are making continuous progress; it just may not be *visible* to us. We tend to associate spiritual progress with something we can see – inner sights and sounds. But progress is much more complicated than we can comprehend.

Hazur often said that the spiritual journey has two stages. In the first stage we withdraw our attention from the extremities of the body and bring it to the eye centre, and in the second stage the soul moves from the eye centre upward. If the withdrawal of the consciousness has two stages, then progress too must have at least two stages.

In the first stage – below the eye centre – the process feels like a struggle. Progress is slow; progress may not be visible. Progress in this stage manifests more as a gradual transformation of our attitude towards life:

You may not have experiences within, but definitely you will feel the effect of meditation. You will enjoy that bliss and happiness and contentment within yourself, and your whole attitude towards life will change. That effect of meditation will be there always whether you experience anything or not.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁴¹

In the second stage – above the eye centre – the process is much easier. Progress is rapid; progress is visible. This is the stage of realization – increasing, deepening levels of realization.

Everything lies inside the focus. Your wildest dreams or imaginings cannot picture the grandeur of what lies within. But the treasure is yours and is there for you. You can have it whenever you go there. Take it from me, and once for all, that everything, including the Creator, is within you, and whosoever has attained it has attained it by going inside the focus.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³⁴²

Seva of the mind involves understanding that progress has multiple stages and that our expectations therefore need to be reset. If we are in the first stage of effort – below the eye centre – it is unrealistic to expect to see the full “grandeur of what lies within.”

Great Master refers to the two stages as ‘going within’ and ‘the rise within’:

Please be not in a hurry. With patience and perseverance, complete the course of concentration. Going within takes time. The rise within is comparatively easier. This part of

the course is tasteless. Taste comes with concentration.
Slow but steady wins the race.³⁴³

The master is urging patience and perseverance. But we are impatient to see a light we've never seen before and to hear a sound we've never ever heard before. We tend to forget that the greatest treasure has already been given to us – the master whom we love is already in our life. We can see him, we can hear him, and we have the opportunity to build an inner relationship with him through meditation.

Sometimes we confuse impatience with longing, but longing is something quite different. Longing comes from love, and in love there is only acceptance. The mystic Rumi speaks of the need for patience and acceptance as we traverse the many stages of the inner path:

Thousands of stations exist
 between dust and the human form.
 I have led you from town to town –
 I will not leave you on the road.
 Say nothing, don't froth,
 leave the lid on the pot.
 Keep boiling patiently,
 for I am cooking you thoroughly.
 You are my polo ball,
 struck by the polo stick of my command.
 Though I have made you run,
 I am running after you.

RUMI³⁴⁴

We are disciples of a true master – we have no need to worry about spiritual progress. If we persevere, love *will* prevail. Great

Master assures us so beautifully that “mind is not stronger than the sound current.”³⁴⁵

The process, however, is slow. Hazur has called our quest to reach the eye centre a lifelong struggle. And Sardar Bahadur Ji explains why the process can take a lifetime:

Our attention has been ‘out’ for ages and to draw it ‘in’ again requires both time and effort. The tendencies established for such a long time are at once up against us when we attempt any reorientation. It is certainly not impossible, but it is naturally difficult and slow.³⁴⁶

And Great Master explains that struggle is a natural part of the process and serves a spiritual purpose. Likening the rise and fall of the attention to the struggle of an ant trying to climb a smooth wall, he says:

The rise and fall are natural and so is the struggle. For that which is achieved after struggle gives strength, self-reliance, and incentive to go ahead. Achievement thus obtained is lasting and can be reproduced at will.³⁴⁷

To be able to approach meditation with an attitude of acceptance, it is helpful to consider why, in the early stages, the master might not make our inner progress apparent to us. It is possible that we could become so absorbed in the sweetness within that we wouldn’t want to leave it, and we would neglect our worldly responsibilities. It is possible that if we were to get the gift too easily we would not value it. Maybe we don’t yet have the spiritual maturity to digest inner experiences. Maybe we haven’t yet developed the spiritual control necessary to not misuse the inner powers that come with progress. Maybe we haven’t yet developed the spiritual strength we need to withstand the

tremendous power of the Shabd within. In short, we may not be ready for inner experience.

Let him accomplish things in his own way rather than in the way that you desire. Try to adjust yourself to all that he does and you will never be unhappy.

MAHARAJ JAGAT SINGH³⁴⁸

If we still want to calculate progress, we might first consider the progress of our own efforts. Ultimately, only three things are in our hands: we can be good human beings, we can saturate our days with simran, and we can steadfastly follow the four vows. It is easy to assess the progress of our efforts on these three fronts.

We can have faith that even if the master initially withholds visible signs of progress, he never withholds grace. Great Master used to say that when a labourer gets his wages after a day's work, is the master so unjust that he will keep back his grace from a diligent disciple?³⁴⁹

On the spiritual path the rewards are *never* proportionate to our efforts – and we can thank God for that, because our own efforts wouldn't take us very far. At first the master may not reveal the treasure because we are not yet ready to receive it; but when he sees we are ready, the floodgates open. And what he gives then is far beyond our limited expectations, far out of proportion with our feeble efforts, and far, far more than we deserve.

This is no light proposition, but your getting Nam means more than if you had inherited a million dollars, or many millions. You are one of the lucky sons of Sat Purush (the Lord), and he has chosen you to get Nam and go with the master to Sach Khand. You must reach there. Nothing can prevent you.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³⁵⁰

Practising the attitudes of selflessness, patience, perseverance, and acceptance, we can tell ourselves that from now until the day we die we will attend to our meditation every day with love and faith – not because we want anything from the master, but simply because we want to be with him.

Please remember there is no place for any disappointment or dejection in Sant Mat. It is a path of joy and hope. When the Lord has chosen you for eternal liberation, then what other power can keep you back for long in this creation? ... The master will see you back home. So give up all your worries and with love and devotion do your duty every day. ... The master is always with you and so is his love.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁵¹

Gratitude

Someone once asked Hazur, “What should be our approach to meditation?” He responded:

Our approach to meditation should be that of gratitude. The Lord has given us the opportunity of this human form and then the environment in which to attend to meditation. So we should always approach meditation with gratitude.³⁵²

At our level, we can barely appreciate the gift of meditation bestowed by a true master.

You will value the saints when you will go within and see for yourself what the master does for the disciple, and how, through the maze of mind and matter, he lifts the soul.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³⁵³

Meditation nourishes our soul's hunger for the divine, expands the boundaries of our consciousness, connects us with the primal power of the Shabd, and allows us to experience Truth. Through meditation we realize that we are not separate from that ocean of infinite love, and we become filled with a deep longing to surrender to it.

Just as a man, weary with the day's work, resorts to his home to take rest, so we habituate our soul, on being tired with worldly work, to take rest in the holy sound. The attention has to be brought inside, and when it likes to rest there, like the wanderer coming home, it will find peace within.

MAHARAJ SAWAN SINGH³⁵⁴

Meditation is our place of refuge, our source of contentment and bliss, our life support system. Out in the world there is noise, struggle, and constant motion. Inside, there is spiritual oxygen; there is stillness, peace, and rest; there is the master waiting for us. We meditate because we *need* it. We meditate because our soul recognizes something that the mind, at this level, cannot – that the Shabd and the master are our truest friends:

Shabd and Nam are the only real, everlasting, and unfailing friends, and these we should try to cultivate. Shabd never deserts, nor does the master.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁵⁵

Meditation gives us inner strength and enables us to fulfil our worldly responsibilities with grace. Our attitude towards worldly relationships and life events changes, and we begin to see the Lord's hand in everything that happens. We learn to swim along with the waves, as Hazur would say,³⁵⁶ and begin to accept what comes to us lightly and cheerfully.

Meditation gives mental strength and spiritual bliss, and enables us to face life with great hope and courage.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁵⁷

Baba Ji once said that the ‘wage’ of meditation is love. Meditation strengthens our faith in the master and builds a bond of deep spiritual love. Physical seva may bring us close to the physical form of the master, but through meditation we develop a truly intimate relationship with the inner master – we develop a love and faith that is unshakeable:

By meditation you develop love that comes with experience, with conviction. Meditation takes our roots very deep in love; nobody can shake us then.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁵⁸

Hazur says, “We have only one future: to go back to the Father. There’s no other future.”³⁵⁹ A deep peace comes with knowing that our destination is guaranteed, that we have been marked to return to the Father. And a deep sense of gratitude comes from knowing that meditation is our path to that future.

Meditating every day helps us build a routine in which spiritual aspiration is part of our daily life. Meditating every day gives us hope that there is a purpose to our life and we are working to fulfil it. Meditation is the compass that always points to our true north – our master. Meditation is a daily reminder that we have not come here to engage with this world one more time; instead, we have come to say our final goodbye to this creation. Meditation gives meaning to our seva, meaning to our life.

Through meditation we fulfil the very purpose of human life.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶⁰

Meditation is the way we express our love for the master, the way we thank him for finding us and bringing us back to life, the way we try to please him, the way we beg his forgiveness for turning away from him so often, the way we ask to feel his presence, the way we cry for help, the way we show our obedience, the way we sing his praises.

The practice of meditation begins with seva of the mind – with obedience – but, over time, the joy takes over and we begin to meditate because we have fallen in love with meditation itself:

When you fall in love with somebody, you automatically want to remain in the company of that person. . . . Similarly, when you fall in love with meditation and you feel peace and bliss within, then whatever little time you can manage, you would at once like to attend to meditation, because you want to be there in that peace, in that bliss. It will increase by itself. You don't have to put forth an effort then at all.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶¹

If the master were to tell us today that to attain liberation we need only do physical seva – if he were to take away the requirement to meditate – would we be happy? We would more likely feel bereft. A day without meditation would be a day without joy, a day without hope. A day without meditation would be a day without our most beautiful seva.

And in the quiet moments, when we feel overwhelmed by the enormity of the gift we've been given, all we can do is meditate. Because we know that the only way to express our gratitude for meditation is to attend to meditation.

The best gift you can give to your master is the gift of meditation. Nothing else matters.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶²

Valuing the Gift

If you were to be united with him
only after the extinction of your vices
and the effacement of your pretensions,
you would never be united with him!
Instead, when he wants to unite you to himself,
he covers your attribute with his attribute
and hides your quality with his quality.

And thus he unites you to himself
by virtue of what comes from him to you,
not by virtue of what goes from you to him.

IBN 'ATA' ALLAH³⁶³

SEVENTEEN

Gratitude

The ocean of his generosity has no shore.
The tongue is powerless to thank,
 the heart too bewildered to understand.
Though my sins are many
 his compassion is greater still –
I swim in the seas of disobedience
 but I do not drown.

SARMAD³⁶⁴

A sevadar at Dera was feeling frustrated and unhappy with seva. He had a difficult relationship with his head sevadar, and working with him day after day, year after year, had begun to take its toll. One day he decided he'd had enough; he was ready to leave seva, leave Beas, and move back to his hometown. With a heavy heart he wrote his resignation letter and walked over to the appropriate department to hand it in. As he waited outside the office, he noticed a lady sitting in a corner, crying as if her heart would break. Concerned, he asked her if everything was okay. "Oh, yes," she replied through her tears. "More than okay. *I just got seva!*"

When the sevadar heard this he was deeply touched. Her joy reminded him of the gratitude he had felt when he first started seva at the Dera. He realized that after years of doing seva he

had begun to treat it like just another job. The frustration he felt towards his seva tasks, fellow sevadars, and department head were the frustrations of a person in a regular job. Somewhere along the way he had forgotten that he was serving a true master. He had become bogged down in personalities, processes, and his own feelings and had started to take seva for granted.

The sevadar felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He returned to his department without handing in his resignation and resumed his seva. In the months and years that followed, nothing changed in his circumstances, but his own attitude towards them changed completely. The things that used to upset him earlier didn't bother him much anymore. He had a new appreciation for the gift he had been given and had very nearly lost.

The nightmare of every sevadar is the very real possibility that we might start taking our seva for granted. When we think that seva cannot carry on without us, or we become arrogant, or approach a seva task as a chore or a hardship, or treat seva as we would a worldly job – this is when we know that we've started to take our seva for granted. This is when we risk losing our seva, or, at the very least, we risk losing some of its benefits and joy.

Seva is not a right – it is a privilege, an honour, and a responsibility. It is a precious gift from the master. If we appreciate the gift and use it correctly it can take our discipleship to the next level. But we are human; there may be times when we feel tired and burnt-out in seva. When such times come it may be worth revisiting what seva means to us, as well as all we have to be grateful for.

Gratitude towards the sangat

When we first come to seva we may hold the commonly accepted view that those who are served should be grateful to those who

serve. But the master creates a shift in our thinking; he teaches that it is those who *serve* who should be grateful.

During the Dera eye camps, sevadars would selflessly serve thousands of people, helping to bring sight to those who had lost all hope of ever seeing again. Most of the people they served were not disciples. Hazur would tell these sevadars that the opportunity to serve was something for which to be very grateful:

We feel fortunate that these patients give us the opportunity to serve them. It is a very rare opportunity to serve anybody, so we are grateful to the patients that we get this opportunity to serve them.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶⁵

We love our seva, and we are aware that without the sangat we would not have seva. So when we are confronted by a particularly challenging member of the sangat and we risk losing our patience, we can remind ourselves that this is exactly what we are here for. It is the sangat's ever-changing needs, demands, and difficulties that create seva for us. We owe them our gratitude for giving us the opportunity to serve.

Gratitude towards our fellow sevadars

The very meaning of seva is to work together in loving harmony to get a job done for the master. Even when our seva requires us to spend large amounts of time working alone, we still need to interact and collaborate with other sevadars, and we have a tremendous influence on each other.

The love and dedication of the sevadars we work with is a great source of inspiration. We watch doctors and architects sweep streets, factory owners clean toilets, carpenters and plumbers guide traffic in the heat and dust, and elderly women who aren't computer savvy figure out how to create spreadsheets.

No task seems too big or too complicated for them, and no task seems impossible. It's not that they don't face challenges and difficulties, but somehow they are able to push through them.

These sevadars don't volunteer to serve because the master is around. In fact, some of them have not seen the master for years. Yet if there is an opportunity to do something for him, they are there, and they do it without expecting anything in return. Some are uniquely gifted and capable, yet they are completely unassuming in their behaviour – simply witnessing their attitude towards seva humbles us. Others have no unique skill, but they do their seva with such a big heart that we are in awe of their spirit of selfless giving. Some of these sevadars have become our mentors – guiding, supporting, and inspiring us. We learn how to love and serve not just from the master but also from each other.

Over the years we may develop deep friendships with people from different economic and cultural backgrounds – people we may not even have met but for seva. Some of these friendships last a lifetime. These are the people who are there for us in the middle of the night if there is a crisis – including people we may not get along with in seva – because there is a strong sense of unity and family that binds us. Through the years, the support of our fellow sevadars becomes a refuge for us. In their company we find a place where we belong and where we can find rest from the fires of the world.

Seva brings us together, and it is our love for the One that holds us together. Our sevadar brothers and sisters are our community, our support structure, our comrades. We have the same goal, face the same struggles, and share the same Beloved. Seva gives us an opportunity to share our love for the divine with each other, to share that journey with each other. Words of gratitude are not enough to thank the master for enveloping us in this blanket of unconditional love and support.

Gratitude for seva

Metamorphosis is the transformation of a creature into a completely different one, either through natural or supernatural means. The most common example of metamorphosis is the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Let us consider the butterfly's process for a moment in the light of seva, which has a similar transformational effect in our life.

After it is born the caterpillar indulges in the pleasure of its little world – eating incessantly. Its movement and worldview are limited to the plant on which it is born. But at some mysterious point, something clicks in its little caterpillar 'brain' and it loses all interest in eating. It finds a suitable spot, builds itself a cocoon, and withdraws into it.

There it completely surrenders itself to a magical process. Biologists tell us that in the cocoon the caterpillar dissolves into a sort of chunky, protoplasmic soup – some of its parts remain intact, some completely dissolve. Over time it regenerates into a completely new form – that of a beautiful butterfly.

But the butterfly is not yet free. The stage of surrender is followed by a stage of intense effort to break free of the cocoon. This struggle to emerge strengthens the butterfly's wings and deepens its instinct to fly. Ultimately it manages to break free and fly into the sky. Is this not a miracle? A limited, leaf-eating caterpillar transforms into a beautiful, ethereal creature that looks different, eats different food, and has the ability to fly. This seemingly miraculous, yet completely natural, transformation is the fruit of both surrender and effort.

Similarly, every disciple of a true master has the opportunity to undergo a process of spiritual metamorphosis. Initially we too are involved in incessant indulgence in the sense pleasures. But at some point, just like the caterpillar, we begin to lose interest. Seva – with body, wealth, mind, and soul – is the

cocoon we voluntarily enter. Each time we meditate, or cook a meal for the sangat, or do a round of simran – we are entering our spiritual cocoon.

Creatures like butterflies and moths enter their cocoon once, remain in it for several days, and come out transformed. Our process is different: we enter our invisible cocoon every day for little bursts of time and then are forced out again into a world of temptations. Over and over again we make sacrifices to set aside these temptations and re-enter the cocoon. This requires countless efforts – big and small – that slowly deepen our faith and spiritual resolve.

Inside the cocoon we surrender to a process we have some faith in but don't really comprehend. Each time we re-enter the cocoon – with each cycle of effort and surrender – we are transformed a little more. Our gratitude deepens as we begin to realize the nature of this transformation:

jaisa sevai taiso hoye.

They become just like the One they serve.

GURU NANAK DEV³⁶⁶

The process of transformation can be painful. Real seva is not always easy. Seva is not a utopia with only nice people and no difficulties. Seva can be messy, seva can be difficult. But in the process it offers infinite learning, infinite growth. When things go well for us in seva we say it is master's grace. But grace comes in many forms. When things don't go so well, that is also grace. The master will only do what is in our best interest:

Our concept of love and kindness is that whatever we want, we should get. But sometimes the mother has to put bitter quinine in the mouth of the child. And the child has to

swallow it, in his interest. But there can be no better love than the mother for the child.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁶⁷

We feel grateful that the master holds up a mirror before us in the form of the sangat and our fellow sevadars. Through them we begin to see our own faults and weaknesses, and then we try to improve ourselves. How do we learn compassion? When we make a mistake, and someone responds with kindness and love. How do we learn humility? When we get angry with someone, reflect on it, feel sorry, think about how the master would want us to respond, and then go back and apologize. The process is bound to be painful at times, but through that pain comes transformation. A Sufi mystic referred to this as the process of being ‘cooked’ by his master Tapduk:

We became servants at Tapduk’s door.
 Poor Yunus, raw and tasteless,
 Finally got cooked, glory be to God.

YUNUS EMRE³⁶⁸

The process of transformation takes a lifetime to complete. It is so slow we can barely discern the shifts from day to day, yet when we look back at our lives we may be amazed at the change he has wrought in us. While the miracle of this transformation is the master’s work, the pace of transformation is largely in our hands; Great Master said that, depending on the amount of effort we put in, we can hasten or retard our own progress.³⁶⁹ The more often we enter our spiritual cocoon, and the longer we stay inside, the more rapid the metamorphosis.

If we are open and receptive to the process, seva – in all its forms – has the power to transform us, from a mere drop into the divine ocean:

The effect is truly a miracle! We turn from the world, and with the same intensity that we once ran towards it, we now run towards the Father. We experience that bliss and joy of real love and real devotion, as we ultimately merge with our master to be transformed from the drop into the divine ocean itself.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁷⁰

While we may not be able to discern the degree of inner transformation, we can experience the peace and bliss that come from meditation, and we can feel the tangible effects of physical seva on our day-to-day life.

We have much to be thankful for. In seva we get the opportunity to do a variety of new things. This increases our confidence and self-esteem yet diminishes our ego at the same time, because we begin to realize how little we really know.

We feel grateful that seva is a safe place, even when it brings challenges. Sometimes we may have to take risks we wouldn't normally take, and in the process we find opportunities to grow. We may learn not just new skills, but also new attitudes and new ways of dealing with situations and people. Many sevadars have said that when they first came to seva, they believed they could use their worldly skills to 'improve' seva. But now, looking back, they feel they have learned so much in seva that they have much to bring back with them to enrich their worldly and spiritual lives.

Sweeping the floor of the monastery, the benefits of understanding are realized.

CHINESE POEM, QUOTED BY THICH NHAT HANH³⁷¹

Seva makes us more humble. When we look back we can see that we are not quite the same self-centred, self-absorbed person who started seva forty years ago, or even four years ago. Seva

gives us an opportunity to practise losing our identity. It gives us the opportunity to step out of ourselves and do something for someone else – to do something not for personal gain but for the joy of serving another. In the process we begin to learn that we are not the centre of the universe. We begin to realize that the master's work is much greater than we are. We learn to put aside our ego and allow the master to function through us. We begin to become a vessel – a channel for the master's work. We begin to see the miracle of how the master gets things done, and we are humbled and filled with gratitude.

Seva also deeply influences our life in the world. The spiritual path is about becoming better human beings. The qualities we learn in seva spill over into our worldly life and make us better family members, friends, and citizens. As we open ourselves to the lessons of seva we become more aware of our own weaknesses and more tolerant of the weaknesses of others. We learn that we are not always right – and that even when we believe we are right, maintaining harmony is more important than winning our way. We begin to avoid negativity and unnecessary arguments, to rise above our preconceived notions and expectations, to become more open to others' points of view. We become more compassionate, peaceful, patient, and flexible. Slowly, the effects of seva seep into our worldly life, lending the fragrance of spirituality and positivity to everything we do. The master says we are all miracles if we consider where we have come from and where we are today.

*Kabir baadal prem ko, ham par barsyo aaye,
antar bheenji aatma, haro bhayo banraaye.*

Kabir, clouds laden with love
in abundance poured down on me;
Within, my soul was drenched,
and around me everything turned green.

KABIR³⁷²

Seva distracts us from our distractions. If we were not doing seva, what would we be doing with our time? Hanging out at the mall? Watching a movie? Surfing the internet? Obsessing over family or work or the world? Seva saves us. It keeps us from getting sucked into the whirlpool of worldly work and personal problems that constantly distract us from our true goal. When we serve others, we are occupied with something greater than ourselves; the mind moves away from petty issues and we are instantly uplifted. As our attachment to seva grows, the worldly things we once loved so much begin to lose their sweetness, and we are drawn towards a deeper love.

Seva can be our oasis of joy and peace. Often, when we leave our hectic work week behind and enter the seva centre, our soul breathes a sigh of relief and joy. How grateful we feel to find a place to rest! When our seva is done, we may sit together and talk about the master. We are free to leave and go home, but we may want to linger in that atmosphere a little while longer. The master is full of joy and he brings this joy with him, like a refreshing breeze that wafts through the centre and touches everyone. Once we taste the sweetness of seva we keep returning for more.

*man tan seetal saant sahaj
laaga prabh ki sev.*

My body and mind are cooled
and are in equipoise;
I've dedicated myself to the service of God.

GURU ARJAN DEV³⁷³

When we do seva our faith deepens, because we get to witness the real 'miracles' of the master. We watch tough, proud sevadars soften over time and become gentle and humble. We watch huge projects get done by sevadars with little prior

experience or skills. Slowly we become aware of the divine hand behind all of it. We realize we are literally witnessing the Lord's work being done, and we marvel at the fact that we have the privilege to participate in it. As our awareness deepens, our faith deepens.

We are full of gratitude because a life of seva is a life filled with love: we serve because we love the master, and the master serves us because he has infinite love for us. And seva gives us an excuse to be with each other – if not always in person, then in spirit. A sevadar who had served both Sardar Bahadur Ji and Hazur Maharaj Ji reminisces about her last meeting with Hazur in 1989. Hazur called a group of sevadars to his room at the Delhi satsang centre to discuss pending seva matters. But when they sat down, he looked over at the seva lists they were holding in their hands and said sweetly, Let's not discuss anything, let's just be together. And that's what they did! Only after he passed away six months later did they realize that he was just wanting to be together with them – that love was all that mattered. The content of the seva didn't matter. It was just an excuse to be together.

We can never do anything to deserve his love. He just gives it and gives it. . . . If the master won't come with his grace, then who will?

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁷⁴

Finally, it is through seva that we learn to surrender to the beloved. One sevadar says: "Our separate self *is* gradually diminished, but it is not an unpleasant process to lose ourselves and become another Being. The One working through the many and the many working as one can be a most blissful experience. He pulls the strings and we dance the dance of the sevadar. We dance in joy because we can *feel* we are being moved by the will of the One." This is the joyful submission of a sevadar.

Thus we find that when we do it with the right attitude, physical seva connects us to the master and creates an environment that supports our meditation; and when we are done with meditation, physical seva keeps us connected with the master. What a perfect system we have been given to grow as spiritual beings!

What would our life be without seva in all its forms? An emptiness? We would survive, of course, but would there be the same joy? As someone said so beautifully: For a sevadar, life without seva would be like a day without sunshine, a day without colour.

Seva is not just a gift, it is a limitless gift. A beautiful passage by the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore illumines this idea:

I had gone begging from door to door in the village path, when your golden chariot appeared in the distance like a gorgeous dream, and I wondered who was this king of kings!

My hopes rose high and I thought my evil days were at an end, and I stood waiting for alms to be given unasked and for wealth scattered on all sides in the dust. Your chariot stopped where I stood. Your glance fell on me and you came down with a smile. I felt that the luck of my life had come at last. Then of a sudden you held out your right hand and said, "What have you to give me?"

Ah, what kingly jest was it to open your palm to a beggar to beg! I was confused and stood undecided, and then from my wallet I slowly took out the least little grain of corn and gave it to you. But how great my surprise when at the day's end I emptied my bag on the floor to find the least little gram of gold among the poor heap. I bitterly wept and wished that I had had the heart to give you my all.

RABINDRANATH TAGORE³⁷⁵

This story illustrates that we, the sevadars, are the greatest beneficiaries of seva. When the master first comes into our lives, our hopes rise; we expect all kinds of grace to be showered upon us; we expect him to make our worldly problems disappear and make our every wish come true. But the master doesn't do any of this. Instead, he puts out his hand and asks *us* to give to *him*. "Give me your time; give me your attention; give me your ego," he says. Hesitantly, very hesitantly – through inner and outer seva, through the way we live our lives – we give him a little something. And we begin to discover that whatever little crumb of our time and attention we give to him, whatever little bit of ego we surrender to him, he transforms it into gold and gives it back to us!

This story also tells us something about our master. We think when we do seva that we are giving something to the master. But the reality is that the master is the greatest giver of all. Mystics do not take from us in meditation and seva; they *give* to us. Seva is just an excuse for them to shower grace on us.

He does much more for us than the human mind can comprehend.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁷⁶

However, the rewards of seva are not immediately visible. The beggar in this story found that crumb of gold at the end of the day and wept bitterly; he wished he'd given his king everything he had. We don't want to look back with regret at a lost opportunity, so we should treasure the gift of seva. Because, as we see from this story, the fruit of seva is pure gold.

Gratitude to the master

As we begin to feel the extent of the master's love for us and the enormous scope of his service to us, we long to express our

gratitude. But the master needs nothing, and words cannot express our gratitude. Besides, while we can thank the giver for the gifts, what words are there to thank the giver for himself?

Once a disciple said to Hazur Maharaj Ji, “I have no specific question to ask you. I just want to thank you for your love.” Hazur replied:

It is all his grace that he gives us his love, he gives us his devotion, and our words are too inadequate to express that feeling, that depth, that gratefulness to the Father. It is impossible.³⁷⁷

Seva is not a choice for the masters. Their love for and obedience to their own master, their infinite love for us, and the needs of the ever-growing sangat – all these compel them to dedicate their lives to serving us. And in this spirit of service they do not spare themselves. They have no motivation other than the liberation of souls, no thought of personal gain, no personal agenda. In the way they live, in what they do, they serve as the ultimate example of selflessness. They do so much for us, yet they always say they do nothing. The moment they get credit for anything they pass it on, saying it was only through the grace of their own master that it got done.

*na kachhu kiya na kari saka, na karne jog sareer;
jo kachhu kiya saahib kiya, ta tein bhaya Kabir.*

I have neither achieved
nor could have achieved anything,
nor had I the power to do so.
Whatever is done, is done by my Lord,
and that is how poor Kabir
has become *Kabir* [the Great].

Perhaps we can never truly understand what a gift it is to serve a mystic, to participate in his divine work. To begin with, we think *we* sign up for seva, but Great Master tells us it is not in our power to do so:

Only such a one is in a position to serve the master as has abundant grace of the Lord, because this service is imprinted on the individual's forehead and was preordained as the result of his actions or karmas in previous lives. He is fortunate indeed who devotes himself to the service of his master, because the Lord himself is manifest in him.³⁷⁹

Not only have we been given the gift of seva, we have also been blessed with an environment that enables us to do that seva:

It is entirely by his grace that we get an opportunity to do seva and that we are capable. Everybody doesn't get the opportunity. Many people may be wanting it, may be anxious to do it, but they never get an opportunity. Their circumstances don't permit them, their environment doesn't permit them, their family commitments don't permit them. It's by his grace that we get this opportunity. . . .

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁸⁰

Then, when we come to seva, we walk in the door utterly full of ourselves – full of weaknesses, expectations, and demands. We make mistake after mistake, but the master forgives each one. He cloaks our faults and says there is no one in the world like his sevadars.

*sevak tein bigrai sau baara,
satguru saaheb lev ubaara.*

*augun sevak saaheb jaanai,
saaheb man mein na gilyaanai.*

A disciple may err a hundred times;
the benevolent master saves him every time.
The master is aware of the disciple's faults,
yet the master does not take them to heart.

DHARAMDAS³⁸¹

The master sees only our potential. He doesn't look at our skills and determine what seva to give to us; he looks at our *need* and gives us the appropriate seva. Then he gives us the skills, intellect, strength, and energy to do that seva. And when the seva is complete – although he has done everything – he stamps our name on it and gives us all the credit.

*karat karaavat aapu hai,
Paltu Paltu sor.*

He is the doer and he himself gets everything done,
yet Paltu is the one who receives all the praise!

PALTU SAHIB³⁸²

Then, after doing everything, the master thanks us! Sevadars' parshad is one of the ways in which the master does this. It is a short, simple, beautiful event during which the master wordlessly expresses his gratitude for our seva and leaves our hearts overflowing with love. But in the depths of our heart we know that more important than sevadars' parshad is the seva itself. *Seva* is the parshad.

As a sevadar once said so beautifully in satsang: "The master's love and grace flows through the hands and hearts of many sevadars on its way to the people of the world. When it flows through his sevadars on its way to where it is going, it also washes away their cares and concerns, their sorrows and separateness.

Just as after a flute is played, the song still vibrates in every atom of it, there are always a few frequencies of his grace left in us after our seva. And if we turn within in meditation, we absorb them. That bliss is our sevadar parshad.”

The master is an enigma – unfathomable, unpredictable, with myriad facets. We may be able to understand his teachings, but we cannot understand him. Instead of attempting to do so, we simply try to love and obey.

As we grow in love, we begin to see that it is not just seva that is a blessing – the whole of our life is an outpouring of divine grace, the whole of our life is parshad. A lifetime of seva and meditation is not enough to express our gratitude to him for all that he does for us.

He has raised me to his own status.

He has put me to rest in the ultimate reality.

TUKARAM³⁸³

EIGHTEEN

Epilogue

*tan man dhan sabh saump gur kau
hukam manniyai paaëeyai.*

Surrender body, mind, wealth,
and everything to the guru;
Obey his will, and you will find him.

GURU AMAR DAS³⁸⁴

*T*he soul is love. The goal is love. And the path to the goal is also love. Although at times it may seem difficult to believe, a true living master has taken us by the hand and is teaching us how to love – through service to the Lord and service to each other.

All of seva is ultimately for the mind: to bend the mind towards the Beloved. Outer seva inspires us to practise inner seva, which is the only seva that can liberate us. And seva of the mind acts as a bridge between outer and inner seva, unifying them.

We began our exploration of seva with Hazur's beautiful teaching: "Seva is love." And we discovered along the way his simple statement that "Love means obedience." It follows then that seva means obedience. As we reflect on what seva means to us, it becomes clear that *this* is at the heart of it: obedience to the master's instructions is everything. As Guru Amar Das says, "Obey his will, and you will find him."

This spirit of obedience is beautifully captured in the Arabic term *labbayka*. One definition of *labbayka* is: ‘I will stick to obeying you again and again.’ At its essence *labbayka* means to serve with loving submission and persistent obedience to the One.

*Labbayka Allaahumma Labbayk.
Labbayk La Shareeka Laka Labbayk.
Inna l-Hamda, Wan-Ni'mata,
Laka wal-Mulk, La Shareeka Lak.*

Here I am at your service, O Lord, here I am.
Here I am at your service,
and you have no partner.
Yours alone is all praise and all bounty,
and yours is all sovereignty.
You have no partner.

TEXT OF THE TALBIYAH,
(PRAYER PERFORMED DURING THE HAJ)

A story in Rumi’s *Mathnawi* reveals how mystics exemplify the attitude of *labbayka*. A spiritually realized sheikh was told by the Lord that he should go to the city and beg from the rich and give to the poor. The sheikh obeyed. When he reached the city, those who had expected to welcome a grand sheikh and hear his enlightened discourses were told that he had just come to beg. Put off by this, they abused him. But despite their ill treatment, the sheikh steadfastly obeyed the Lord.³⁸⁵

Of the sheikh in the story, Rumi says:

His inward experiences were higher
than the footstool and the throne of God;
His external business was to cry,
“Something for God’s sake,
something for God’s sake!”

The prophets, every one, ply this same trade:
 The people to whom they are sent
 are really destitute,
 Yet the prophets practise beggary,
 crying, “Lend to God, lend to God,”
 and perversely urging them:
 “Help God!”³⁸⁶

This is what saints do! They beg us to do our seva and meditation: “Please give to God, please give to God!” When they ask us to give to God, they have nothing personal to gain from it. They ask us to give because they know how much *we* will gain from it.

When we serve with body, wealth, mind, and soul, we are in essence calling out in surrender: “Here I am at your service, my Lord! I commit to obeying you again and again.” Rumi showers the highest praise on such a spirit of *labbayka* – such unflagging obedience:

When anyone possesses the spirit of the glory of *labbayka*,
 letter upon letter and messenger after messenger are sent
 to him, as when the window of a house is open, sunbeams
 and moonbeams and rain and letters and so forth never
 cease from coming in.³⁸⁷

So let us give – give of ourselves to him! For when we open our window to the glory of selfless service, we too will find that messages and messengers and sunbeams and moonbeams come pouring in!

You have just to give yourself to him, and then he gives you everything. . . . He makes you God; he makes you the Lord.

MAHARAJ CHARAN SINGH³⁸⁸

*satgur ki seva safal hai je ko kare chit laaye.
naam padaarath padaeyai achint vasai man aaye.*

Fruitful is service to the true guru
if one does it with a sincere mind.
The treasure of Nam is obtained
and the mind becomes free of anxiety.

GURU AMAR DAS³⁸⁹

ENDNOTES

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Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee in Amritsar, India, is the source for the Adi Granth (AG) quotations; translations used throughout this book have been taken from approved English-language versions.

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*satgur sev sada sukh paaya
joti jot milaa'i.*

Serving the true guru, eternal peace is obtained,
and one's light merges into the Light.

GURU AMAR DAS³⁹⁰

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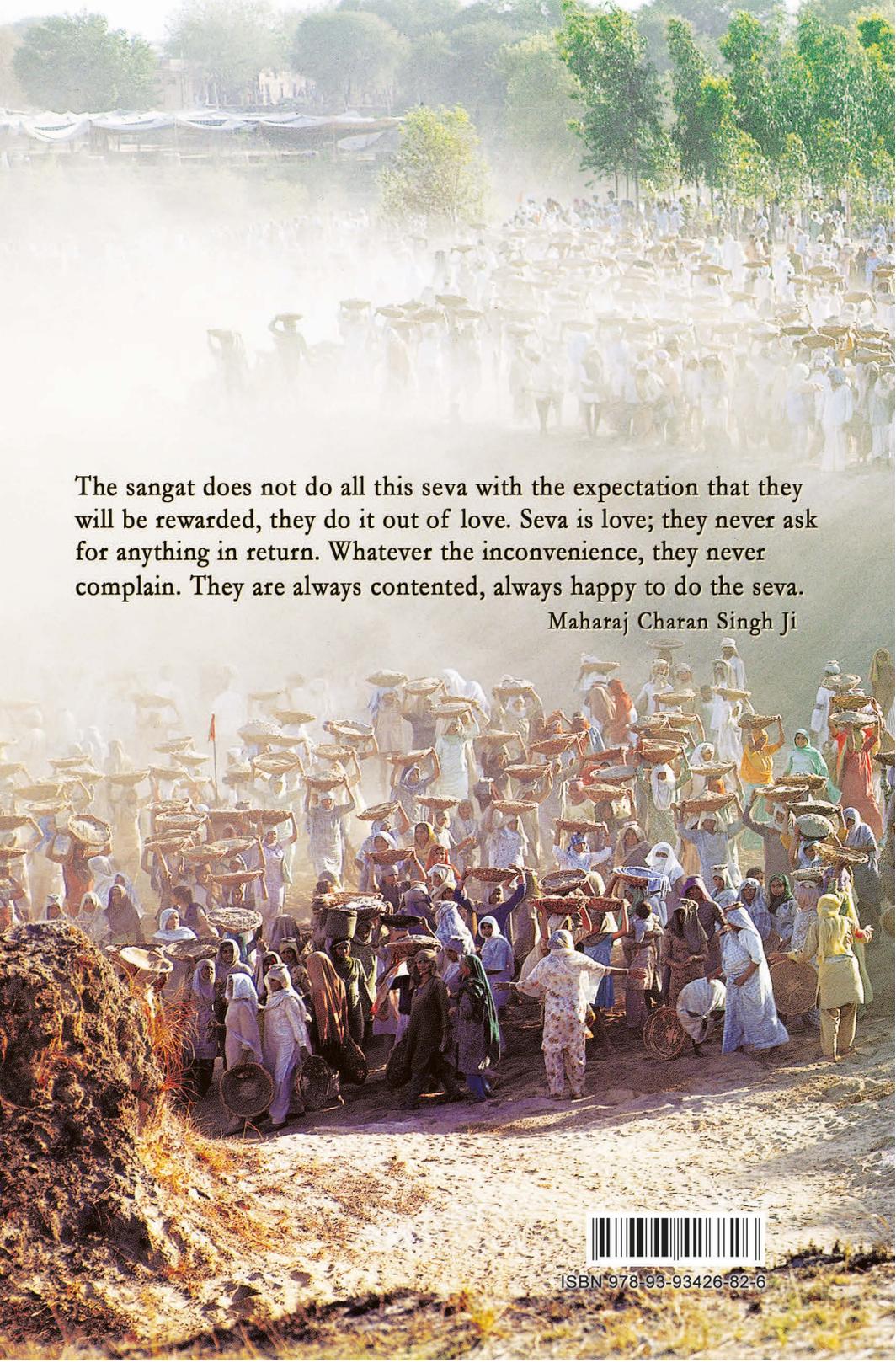
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The sangat does not do all this seva with the expectation that they will be rewarded, they do it out of love. Seva is love; they never ask for anything in return. Whatever the inconvenience, they never complain. They are always contented, always happy to do the seva.

Maharaj Charan Singh Ji



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