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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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All That Is Not God

If you meet a mystic in this life,
do this, dear friend –
take up his sword of Shabd,
for it will sever from your soul
all that is not God.

You will still adore the darling faces of your family,
but this blade will pierce your heart
and bleed your soul into the stream of spirit,
until you fall in love with the Light
that shines behind every face on earth,
and you call everyone your own.

You may still run toward your blind ambition
to buy land and put paper in your pockets.
But all you own and all you ever win
will never be enough to fill the emptiness of exile
or quench your endless thirst for something yet unseen.
And the desires you birth that do not benefit your soul
will arrive on earth, silent and stillborn,
without bright future or debt of consequence.

If you meet a mystic in this life,
do this, dear friend –
take up his sword of Shabd,
for it will sever from your soul
all that is not God.

You will no longer fear the dark inside yourself,
for this blade will rend the veil of night to reveal
an eternal sunrise behind your eyes.

And the shadow self you always thought was you
will die in the Light and be left behind
in an unmarked grave – somewhere
along the sunny road to oneness.



The Waiting Room

It can seem like we spend a lot of our lives waiting: waiting for the pandemic to be over, waiting to see family and friends, or waiting for our health to be restored. We might be waiting to feel like a grown-up, or waiting to become financially secure, or waiting for the world to make more meaningful responses to the threats of climate change.

On our spiritual path, most of us are waiting for sound and light. We want to hear and be lifted by the Shabd. We want to see the radiant Master, our Beloved, within ourselves. We have been waiting for discernible spiritual progress. Instead, the place where we are waiting may seem to us dark and silent.

When we were first initiated, we might have been among those deluded souls who assumed we wouldn't have to wait at all! We hoped that as soon as we were initiated, with just a few rounds of simran, we would be fully prepared to return to the Lord. Decades later, often many decades later, we have had to conclude that we weren't anywhere near as receptive or as ready for enlightenment as we imagined. Our destiny turns out to have been something far beyond what we might have expected. Our attachments are stronger than we thought. Our capacity for distraction seems endless. We have had duties and obligations in the world that have filled our days and years. And apparently, most of us have had a lot of karma to go through.

The waiting rooms of the material world (at the doctor's, the government office, or the train station) are mostly uncomfortable places, perhaps containing a few old magazines, a blaring TV and constant, unintelligible announcements. While there, we might ponder all the important activities we are missing. We might twiddle our thumbs, tap our feet, or scroll through our phones.

But the space we inhabit while we await spiritual progress is profoundly different. To begin with, "waiting for God" is the most important thing we can do. It is essential and life-giving. We are waiting at the eye centre for the most fortunate meeting of our lives – our meeting with our spiritual teacher. This waiting is neither passive nor unproductive. We are active and engaged, in a place of true higher learning. While we wait, we learn

the importance of effort, the limits of our own minds and our need for forgiveness. We are learning humility, patience and obedience. In this waiting period, our lives will be happily spent if we are practising trust, courage and perseverance. This spiritual time of waiting has unimaginable resources available to the initiate.

Most important, we do not wait alone. As Shams-e Tabrizi said to his disciple Rumi (in *Shams-e Tabrizi*), “Do you not see the grace of our companionship, which is also eternal?” And in *Philosophy of the Masters* (Vol. V), the Great Master describes just how close the Guru is to his initiates:

He remains constantly with the disciple and helps him.... He is the helper of the helpless and supporter of the unsupported.... The Master does not let the disciple face situations that are too difficult for him.... the Master protects the disciple from sufferings and difficulties without even telling him anything about them.

So, we have the best, most loving company while we wait. But we also are given important work to do – meditation. Simran and bhajan are by far the most productive way we can spend our time in this waiting room. Hazur wrote in *Die to Live* that every minute we meditate is to our credit and moves us forward.

There are other activities and resources we can use that will help us in our meditation. Satsang, spiritual literature that inspires and encourages our efforts, and seva. Serving the Master, the community, or the people we encounter in our daily lives is the most productive and satisfying way we can spend our time out in the world while we wait.

We have also been given prashad. Our spiritual teachers tell us that every breath is prashad, a gift. We are not only supposed to appreciate the many gifts of this life, we are also urged to use them to move closer to what is true, real and eternal. If the Lord is constantly showering extraordinary gifts on us (such as the beauties of nature, friends who stick with us through thick and thin, and shelter from the elements), we need to be grateful, to appreciate what he has given. It is our responsibility and privilege to marshal these resources into the energy that will enable us to continue our spiritual efforts with enthusiasm and positivity.

There are certain mindsets that are counterproductive in our metaphorical waiting room. It is not recommended to:

- *Petition the Master for early release.* While our longing and impatience to be with our Beloved might feel compelling, it is the height of arrogance to dictate to the Guru what we believe is the right schedule for our release. If God is all-knowing, then he knows our destiny and when and how we will enter the realms of higher consciousness. We do not.
- *Describe to the Master what our discipleship should look like.* The Masters ask us to do our best. They welcome our efforts. But they do not expect us to control the mind through sheer willpower. (Only the Shabd can control the mind, we are taught.) Great Master neatly summed up our dilemma in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. V: “If it had been in our own power to go back, we would not have remained separated from the Lord.” In this waiting room, we are learning how to beg, be receptive, and want what the Lord wants us to be, not to become idealized super-disciples who try to fly under their own power back to God.
- *Put our faith in an ideal location.* We might imagine that it would be easier to wait at the Dera, or to wait in another country, or to be surrounded by a different set of people. But as the Masters often repeat, what we want will be given to us only on the inside. All other outer scenarios (jobs, life circumstances, relationships, political solutions) will ultimately leave us unsatisfied and restless.
- *Get discouraged.* This is not a path for the faint of heart. If we must spend a long time waiting, it will do no good to become frustrated or despondent. Maharaj Jagat Singh said it beautifully in *The Science of the Soul*:

We must strive hard to subdue the mind and put in every effort to drive away the evil qualities that overpower us. But if after struggling very hard we still find that we have not advanced a single foot on this long journey, we should not get disheartened. Master knows well that with our feeble hands and feet, we shall not be able to accomplish this journey even if we were to go on travelling for a hundred

thousand years. He wants to impress upon us that unless the Lord's grace intervenes, no one can walk on this path of immortality. When we collapse and fall, and have no strength to struggle further, then Master's loving kindness and grace will carry us forward as a tottering child is carried in the arms by its mother.

The waiting room is where we will experience the Lord's loving kindness and grace. And that is worth waiting for.



Standing Before My Master

Maybe you have summoned up the courage to ask the Master a question that has been occupying your mind and burning in your heart. Or maybe you have no questions or could never dream of actually speaking to your Master. I know I have fallen into all these categories at some time or another.

Last summer I had an opportunity to ask Baba Ji a question for the first time. After not seeing him for almost two years and being in the midst of a pandemic, being in his presence felt like a gift wrapped in grace.

This was a new experience for me, and my mind took over the entire situation. Even before asking my question, I thought I knew what and how he would answer. And I wondered: Was I worthy of this opportunity? How would I speak to him – address him? Where would I look? What voice would I use? How would he see me?

My question became almost irrelevant in the midst of my mind's feverish gymnastics; my heart beat faster and my breath felt shallower just thinking about standing in front of him.

When it was finally my turn, I'm not sure what words tumbled out of my mouth, but he got what I was saying, and his answer was not the one I was expecting. I don't remember much, except that he reminded me to be grateful. It felt as if time itself stood still. I was a wreck, not knowing how to respond or what to think. Afterward, dazed and confused, my mind ached for understanding, for some compartment in which to place the experience. I wanted to reassure myself that what had just happened was meaningful. What was the Master trying to tell me? What was he showing me?

Looking back now, I realize that this intellectual mind cannot grasp what the Master is – he is unfathomable. How could I, in that short, tiny moment know anything of his greatness? I see that I need to stop analyzing my experience, something Baba Ji constantly reminds us of. I also need to give up looking for results. I see that by craving a particular outcome or feeling that aligns with my preconceived notions and limited perspective, I will probably miss something more subtle.

We can tie these lessons back to our meditation practice. As Baba Ji says, just do it. We need to stop analyzing what happens during meditation and stop expecting results. Easier said than done, I know. A clear mind filled with simran is likely more receptive – both in meditation and for truly listening to what the Master says.

I see now that the Master is not what we think he is. And he will shake us out of who we think we are and what we think we know and leave us scratching our heads, more confused than ever. The key seems to be to stop our thinking minds with simran and then just wait and be.

If we could empty ourselves and still our minds, which is the objective of simran, we would be open and receptive to the Shabd, to his love, to the stream of light and sound we are told comes with the practice of bhajan. Mostly with the letting go of the endless thoughts and scenarios our minds create, we would be so still that we would see and feel the Master's grace everywhere, not only when we are blessed to be in his physical presence.

The Master is all love. He is an endless source of constant giving. It is we who have put up the barriers of our egos and our minds. We hold on to limited beliefs, and the world casts its spell of illusion, preventing us from seeing clearly. As the author of the book *Sufi Talks: Teachings of an American Sufi Sheikh* says, quoting the Prophet Mohammed: "God points out: 'There are seventy thousand veils between you and Me, but there are no veils between Me and you.'"

The Master comes to tear down these veils, to bring us out of our darkness and into his light. Slowly but surely, he draws us out of our limited selves. As we begin to question our so-called knowledge, we realize how little we really know about spirituality and how blindsided we are by our intellects. Then we have no choice but to surrender in humility.

Standing in front of my Master that day nearly a year ago brings a lifetime of lessons and insights with it, but something tells me that I urgently need to practise what he teaches – to live the path and then to leave everything else in his hands.

I will never forget the mercy and kindness I saw in his eyes that day. I'm still not totally sure what happened as I stood before him, but I have a feeling that it will carry me through all my days.

It reminds me of a few lines of poetry written by a satsangi:

*If you fall in love with a King...
If your eyes should rest in his eyes, then for the rest of your life,
You will be searching every face for his light.*

Also, I have newfound respect, compassion and kinship for those dear souls who stand up to ask him a question!



Turning Our Lives Right-Side Up

Sometimes it feels as if everything is upside down and as if we are on our own, trying to find our way out of the darkness. As the Yiddish proverb goes, we plan and God laughs. God sees us go down so many roads trying to direct our lives, yet we have no control.

The only expectation we can really have in this life is that nothing goes according to plan, so we might as well expect the unexpected. In fact, unexpected things are happening all the time. So why not relax? All we really need to do is to search for the Lord and then let everything else go however it goes. Eventually we learn that things have a way of working out. But until we realize and acknowledge that we are seeking the Lord, everything continues to feel upside down. We feel dissatisfied, disoriented. We know that things are not quite right. So how do we turn our lives right-side up?

We need to find a Master and follow his instructions. Or rather, we need to trust the Master when he finds us. Life feels upside down because, without a Master to guide us, nothing makes sense. We need the Master to put our lives and worldly events into context for us, to give us a spiritual perspective, to show us what is important and what is not.

For example, unless we search within, our focus continues to be outward on temporary, fleeting things. Over time we find we need very little to be both comfortable and happy. But most of us own much more than we need. We have closets so stuffed that we often can't find what we already have. Rather than clean out and simplify, we tend to just go out and buy more stuff. We may even buy a bigger house or a second home to hold all our possessions. Having so many things becomes a burden, unnecessarily taking up our time and attention.

Maharaj Charan Singh used to say there are three things you should never get rid of in life: an old pair of shoes, an old coat, and an old friend. These things comfort us. An old pair of shoes helps us walk easily in this world; a comfy coat keeps us warm; an old friend supports us through both good times and bad. In general, everything else is window dressing – just outward accessories that divert us from putting our effort toward going home to the Lord. Everything has an expiration date – our

things, our families, our lives; only the Lord is eternal. In his poetry, the mystic Sultan Bahu shows us the simplicity of true spirituality: “I fixed my attention on the Lord. I then placed my soul in his protection.”

But fixing our attention on the Lord is challenging. Because the Lord is a mystery, we may not fully trust or believe that he exists. We need to push ourselves within, while placing absolute faith and trust in the Master’s guidance. A story that demonstrates such trust is of a woman who decided to take up free diving in her forties. Despite having no experience, she showed extraordinary talent. Early on, she did not see diving as just a sport. She realized that it required much more than physical training in swimming, breathing, and timing. To dive deeper and deeper, she had to enter a different state, one in which she let go of the “surface fuss,” as she called it, until everything extraneous to her goal faded away and she became one with the water.

This is what we need to do in meditation: eliminate the surface fuss and dive deep into the silent, still water of the Shabd. But we need a Master to facilitate our journey. In the book *Heart’s Witness*, we read these words by a Sufi mystic:

*None blows fire
Into our hearts
Like him,
None makes short
The path to him
But him*

Without that fire in our heart, we get tangled up in the world. When that fire is finally lit, we seek peace within and enter into communion with the Lord. We live within the Lord’s shelter. To fully traverse the path within, Buddha told his disciples to do two simple, practical things: start and don’t quit. If we want to go home to the Lord, we must turn our longing into the practical steps of meditation and then stay with it. We need to make a commitment to keep trying.

Meditation is like walking, in that we have to put one foot in front of the other. We need just to keep doing the actions that will move us forward. After all, we don’t typically walk backwards or sideways.

Just like following our natural inclination to walk forward, we need to deepen our inclination to meditate. When we want to get someplace, we do what is necessary to go there, even if we think it will be hard or beyond our capabilities. That's how it is in meditation. We need to just do it. We need to make it the centerpiece of our life.

Saint Teresa of Avila, a 16th-century Carmelite nun, led an extraordinary life. She challenged the church hierarchy, was in a coma and paralyzed for years as a young woman and eventually recovered. She committed herself to leading a monastic life and devoting herself to God. In the book *Let Nothing Disturb You*, she is quoted as saying: "If you have God you will want for nothing." All of her writings convey that life is an empty journey without God's companionship.

Joseph Campbell tells us (in *A Joseph Campbell Companion: Reflections on the Art of Living*) that "we must be willing to get rid of the life we've planned, so as to have the life that's waiting for us." To heed this wise advice, we need to ask ourselves how to turn our lives right-side up; how to put our hand in the hand of the Lord and follow where he leads us. If we open ourselves up to his companionship, the life waiting for us is divine. In spirituality we must be ready to surrender, to start and not quit until we are truly liberated and can live the life that's waiting for us.



Which Child Am I?

During one of Baba Ji's question-and-answer sessions, someone asked a question about realizing the Lord through submission. In response, Baba Ji talked about meditation being the easier way – the path that leads to submission. He also spoke about spiritual maturity, which allows us to understand that everything the Lord gives us is for our own good.

He ended the exchange with a powerful metaphor. He described the difference between an innocent child who jumps into his father's arms from a table without hesitation, and an older one who hesitates, thinking about whether his father will really catch him if he jumps. The little child has complete faith that his father will catch him. But the older child starts analyzing the situation, worrying about whether he'll be caught or if he might fall. The Master suggested that we be innocent like a small child and simply surrender to the Lord unquestioningly.

You might ask yourself, "Which child am I? The one that fully trusts and is ready to jump, or the one that hesitates, worries and doubts?" A letter Baba Jaimal Singh wrote to his disciple Maharaj Sawan Singh, published in *Spiritual Letters*, helps us think about how to answer these questions. He begins: "The day the individual being, that is the soul, separated from Sach Khand and the Shabd-dhun, that very day its trust in the True Lord and the Shabd-dhun was also severed." He goes on to say, "The Shabd-dhun looks after it [the soul] all the time, but it does not realize this because its love and loyalties are deeply entrenched in mind and maya ... and the senses that deceive."

Baba Jaimal Singh then writes: "The Satguru, attaching the disciple again to the same Shabd-dhun, will guide him back to Sach Khand. So the disciple's trust that remained broken in life after life has been restored."

Just because our faith wavers doesn't mean that the Lord has stopped taking care of us. But in our delusional state, unaware of the Lord's presence in our lives because we are trapped in mind and maya, we chase desires and dreams that we believe will give us some comfort or happiness. We have forgotten that the only thing that will give the soul peace is to merge back into its source.

How do we re-establish our connection with the Lord once our trust in it has been broken? That separateness is itself an illusion. We just have to realize our true essence, our true identity. It is a state of awareness, of realization.

Bulleh Shah explains the idea in the book *Bulleh Shah*:

Oh Bullah, the Lord is not separate from us.

Other than the Lord, none exists.

Alas! We do not have the seeing eye.

That's why life is a tale of suffering.

We have to develop our “seeing eye” – wake up from the dream of suffering and realize that we have been in the Lord’s embrace all along. The Master often reminds us that when he is talking to us, we see him; we hear him. But we turn around and look the other way. He is still there; he is still talking – he hasn’t gone anywhere. It is we who have turned away.

Our meditation practice enables us to turn our attention back to him – inward and upward – and realize for ourselves that there is no separation. It was just that we had turned away. In that turning away, we gained nothing but sorrow and misery. And in turning back around and experiencing the Shabd, we gain faith and trust; we gain the Beloved himself.

No words can describe the bliss of that experience. The trust which was broken is fully restored, and we become that little child who is able to jump when the father says jump – with innocence and true faith – into our Father’s arms.



The “Dark Between Stars”

It is well known that the darker the skies are, the more brilliant the stars appear. In fact, if we look up at the night sky with our limited vision, we may observe more ink-black sky than stars. Yet, the immense darkness of the universe does not diminish the captivating beauty of the stars, but rather enhances their luminosity. The juxtaposition of dark and light is profound and evidence of life’s duality: where there is pleasure, sunshine and growth, there is also sorrow, rain and death.

Individually, we may experience overwhelming feelings of fear, doubt, uncertainty and loneliness. And on a collective level, throughout history there is evidence of global suffering and turmoil. These moments of our lives can be discouraging and may foster negative thoughts. Naturally, it is during our darkest times that we are inclined to question how to live with purpose and find meaning .

Kahlil Gibran, in *The Prophet*, describes the necessity of heartache for spiritual liberation:

*Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding.
Even as the stone of the fruit must break,
that its heart may stand in the sun,
so must you know pain.*

Spiritual teachings explain that every trial, setback or adversity enters our life with purpose and is part of the divine plan; these are the catalysts that provide opportunities to redeem ourselves through development and growth. The mystics say we are here to learn and realize our divine purpose.

So, this human experience, with all its dark and light, definitely has intrinsic value. In our so-called dark times, our spiritual practice fortifies the foundations on which we can rely to endure the challenges that come our way. As Maharaj Charan Singh explains in *Quest for Light*:

There are always ups and downs in life. Things never remain the same, and we should try to face these moments of trial with patience and courage, keeping full faith in him.... To make an effort is our duty, but

the results are not in our hands. Sometimes we have to learn to live with our handicaps when efforts fail. This is the time of test for us and we should not lose our mental equilibrium, but say and sincerely believe that this is the will of the Lord and we accept it in all humility. Who knows? Things could have been worse. So our feeling of gratitude to him must never be lost.

The saints teach us that the light is always within us. Yet it is faith – which encompasses hope, courage and gratitude – that can be described as the “dark between stars” (a term coined by a contemporary writer known as Atticus). This “dark between stars,” though difficult, is the very stitching that binds together and enriches the tapestry of our lives. The faith it engenders not only holds and carries us through our lowest of lows but inspires within us love and longing for the Lord.

In this karmic dance of give and receive, the Lord’s grace can easily go unnoticed, as it is often granted in ways we may not recognize – through illness and hard times, for example. Yet, there is immense peace to be found in surrendering to and accepting the Lord’s will. Letting go of our expectations and desires leads to the realization that everything in life comes to us with the Lord’s approval.

Great Master, in *The Dawn of Light*, explains what it means to accept his will with humility:

Take for granted that all that has happened, is happening or will happen, is with His will. So whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, we should remain contented. If He sends us misery, we should accept it with pleasure, and if He keeps us happy, we should take it as His children. So do not consider that your life is not a bed of roses. Take it as His gift and be happy in it.... His mission is to take souls up, and a soul once initiated, is never deserted. This is the law.

As humans we are naturally inclined towards hope. It allows us to acknowledge that life isn’t always easy, but even when we feel as though we are suffering in darkness, we are still deserving of light. If we seek inspiration in our teachings and open our hearts in gratitude to our Master, we’re more likely to find hope. Archbishop Desmond Tutu, a human-rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize winner, reminded us in his

book *Everyday Ubuntu* that “hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.”

Each morning our meditation is an opportunity to retreat to an inner sanctuary where we can embrace the bliss that is silence and solitude. We reinforce our faith in the Lord and our Master by attending to our spiritual practice every day. Meditation gives us the courage to live with a forgiving and resilient heart, in which hope cannot be vanquished. Rabindranath Tagore, the noted Bengali poet, philosopher and artist, encapsulates the beauty of hope in his line: “Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings when the dawn is still dark.”

Being human is a sum total of all our experiences, moments of both light and dark. We are here on this spiritual journey to learn how to appreciate not only those moments of light, fulfillment and joy, but also how to imbue our hardships and struggles with faith, hope, courage and love for the Lord. For the Lord is everything. He is the stars, and he is the dark between stars.



The Voice of Silence

There was once a high-school English teacher who, although old and often racked with pain, could somehow control her classes and get them to listen to her. When the students got noisy and rowdy, she wouldn't raise her voice – she would lower it. She would calmly begin talking in a soft voice, just above a whisper. At first, the students making the most noise didn't notice, but some in the front rows did and would try to tune their ears to hear what she was saying or even try to shush their loud classmates. Sometimes, she would reveal things that the students actually wanted to hear – an announcement of early dismissal, or a key homework assignment that could be avoided by reciting a poem for the class. Gradually, the quiet would spread throughout the room, and soon every student was hanging on her words, straining to hear anything she had to say. She knew the power of quietness.

We live in bombastic times. Quiet is rare and seemingly not much valued by those making the most noise. They have not learned the secret that mystics universally teach – silence opens the door to the Shabd, to God. Religious orders know the importance of silence – not only living in a quiet atmosphere in order to hear the voice of God, but also in controlling one's personal tongue, which can wag only too eagerly. The military also knows the value of silence; experienced soldiers have witnessed the truth of that old adage “loose lips sink ships.”

In our pursuit of God, we are taught that silence is essential as we listen for the secret treasure of the Sound Current. We also know that our own personal silence, while we repeat the five holy names, can keep worldly distractions at bay.

There is a story in the Bible about the prophet Elijah, told in the first book of Kings, Chapter 19. It seems that Elijah went into a cave to spend the night, and the voice of the Lord asked him what he was doing there. Elijah explained that he was fighting for the Lord because the children of Israel had forsaken his covenant, torn down his altars and killed his prophets. The Lord then told him to go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord. He saw that a great wind tore into the mountains, but the Lord was not in the wind; an earthquake and a fire followed, but the

Lord was not in those either. Finally, a “still, small voice” told him where he was to go and what he was to do. The story illustrates that by isolating ourselves, we too can hear that still, small voice and be guided by it.

As the Master advises us, it is only after continued humble and earnest listening that we can begin to ascertain which is the voice of God and which is our own mind chattering to us as it worships the false gods of lust, anger, greed, attachment and ego.

We hear various descriptions of the spiritual path we follow, but one aspect becomes obvious to us once we have been exposed to Sant Mat. This is a very quiet path. We do not seek to convert anyone. The Sufi mystic Hafiz is quoted in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. II:

When the Emperor of Love presented a robe to me, the meaning of the gift was very clearly explained to me in the following language: ‘O Hafiz! Be careful. You must remain quiet because this is not the path of the talkative. It is the path on which one has to merge oneself in Love and become Love itself.’

Staying mute about our quiet path, even when we feel the urge to expound, has multiple benefits. On a mundane level, we do not get a lot of criticism from those who do not understand. It’s difficult enough, sometimes, to receive criticism from our family and friends when they detect that we are changing our habits. But at least we are not being killed for our beliefs and practices, as so many in the world are. We are not to hide the truth from earnest seekers, nor should we be ashamed of our path. But we are taught not to go out of our way to proselytize or broadcast our beliefs and practices.

And, as Hafiz says about this not being the path of the talkative, the process of trying to merge ourselves in a path of love is not possible if our mind constantly dissipates our energy. Our whole way of life must become quieter, more restrained, contained in all ways.

As we obey the caution of not talking too much about our path, we also gradually discover that there is power in silence. We practise our meditation in silence, not while listening to any external music, for example. We repeat our simran silently throughout the day as well as during our meditation time. If and when we have inner experiences,

we are to keep quiet and digest them, as the Masters advise us not share them with anyone except possibly with our Master.

If we begin to feel frustrated about not being able to get fully in touch with the Master's inner radiant form or achieving the level of love and union that we desire, we must be patient, not beat ourselves up or complain or demand. We are advised to remain silent, as Hafiz has described. Even if our condition becomes like a pressure cooker, with the heat building up inside to the point that we feel we might explode, we are to stick to the eye focus and do our repetition, listening and trying to develop our faith and love quietly.

Great Master said in *Spiritual Gems* that "all truth is inside of you. Not only so, but the very kingdom of Heaven is within you." Our search for truth in our silent sitting is the most important journey we can take as human beings. It will lead us beyond the realm of duality, of ego and all the rest of the illusions clouding our quest for oneness with the Lord. The Masters say that with effort, we will eventually become pure enough to merge back into the Shabd. Each of us must undertake this journey on our own, sitting quietly and calming the mind as we listen to the voice of the silence.



Divine Connection

Saints tell us that initiation is an opportunity to realize our connection to the Divine. To realize and revitalize this deeply hidden connection, we need to look inside our own selves. By being initiated, we are in no way special or different from anyone else. We are just more curious about reality and what lies beyond death, and more dissatisfied with the smoke screen that our false self – our temporary personality – raises in front of us, blocking access to who we really are. By stepping on this spiritual path, we begin to know our forgotten self, which is the divinity within. This is the self-realization that comes before God-realization.

The one connection that matters most is the connection to our own inner reality, our essence. God is nowhere outside, but closer to us than our own nose. Our true, divine self is like an old relative that has been secretly supporting us, sending us funds, friends, resources, to sustain us and keep us happy – but we did not even know of the existence of this benevolent kin.

In our ignorance, we run after all kinds of other connections, linking ourselves into countless networks that only keep expanding. Yet these attachments obscure the only one that matters. What we are really craving is our inner connection to a reality and a truth that is beyond the shifting sands of our daily struggle for survival. Baba Jaimal Singh in *Spiritual Letters* explains to his disciple Maharaj Sawan Singh (Great Master) that he has to work on detaching himself from the world in order to become permanently attached to the Divine within: “When the mind is not attached to any external tasks or material forms in the world, when in hardship or happiness the mind does not waver, then is the command for attachment to the inner form given.”

The inner form that Baba Jaimal Singh mentions is our true self. It is what we are eager to realize, to awaken to, to meet face to face. This is truth, because this is what lasts. We cherish our false, temporary personalities, but these will vanish into thin air the moment the body breathes its last breath. Our soul continues its journey loaded with so many karmic actions, good and bad, with so many impressions that it drags from life to life. But all that is false and illusory and does not last;

the rust of time washes it away. We want to reconnect with something that is permanent, stable. We want to realize the truth within us. Truth is no abstract formula or idea, but life itself. It is also the essence of our own life. Most important, truth is something that we came from, something we are subordinate to. It is higher than us, bigger than us.

The truth is the Shabd, manifested in the all-powerful, conscious Satguru, who takes notice of the soul's worth and longing and blends it with itself. The connection, the relationship to the Shabd, is initiated by the Satguru, the true Master. Once this connection is made, the Shabd then keeps the mind tightly in tow – tugging at it like an animal tied to a rope. Pulling the mind thus, little by little, the Shabd blends it with itself and leaves it behind in Trikuti, allowing the soul to go beyond the mind and maya, the illusion of this world.

Some people say that there is no such permanent truth, but the mystics disagree because they have touched and experienced it, and once they experience it, they all begin to speak the same language: the language of universal love and compassion, the language of unity and inner silence.

Mystics come to show us where truth can be found. The mystic comes to us in a human form, but he does not say that the truth is in that form. He says that truth is in the Shabd, the holy spirit. The physical form is an ambassador for that power in this land of limitation and darkness. As a faithful ambassador of the holy spirit, the Master always challenges us, claiming that he may be a fraud. He does not want us to worship the physical, including his own form. Indeed, if we get stuck on the level of the physical, if we do not make the effort to attain inner spiritual truth, to find truth in our own inner castle, we are just going from one illusion to another. Without the connection to the inner Name, Word, or Shabd, without an ever-deepening connection to the divine reality within us, we choose to remain with our unverifiable concepts and illusions. The only thing that can protect us from these concepts and illusions is our personal search for the truth and our personal experience of it. That is the only thing that cannot be washed away by the flood of time.

Our soul has come from high spiritual regions, from ultimate reality, and has the capacity to rise again to those heights and regain its lost freedom. We have the capacity to struggle. The best and most effective

approach in the quest for this truth, this consciousness, this divine connection, is through meditation on the Word of God. So, it is a two-sided approach: our meditation is supported by our commitment to the struggle against our own weaknesses, and the struggle against our own weaknesses is automatically made 'doable' through our meditation and the path we are on. Through meditation we develop the strong willpower to go through life without reacting, no matter how powerful the provocations and challenges may be.

We inevitably realize our weakness and helplessness. At some point we realize that our individual strength and talent is not enough to attain our goal. Then we begin to realize our nothingness and start to develop receptivity to God's grace. The more humble we become, the more we realize his grace. We then develop gratitude, which in turn feeds into our sense of connection with the Divine, the deeper truth within us all. In *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh kept telling the Great Master to keep these words uppermost in his mind: "I am nothing." As the self recedes, the Divine emerges.

The attainment of truth, of our divine connection, is not something that we will receive without an intense inner struggle. It is also not something that we will attain on our own, without divine grace. The struggle itself is a sign of grace. Every challenge and so-called catastrophe that we experience awakens a part of us that we were not even aware existed and helps us move forward with that better, stronger part of ourselves that was lying dormant until then. This is what living the path with positivity, faith, and courage is about. And this is only possible to attain on the bedrock of a solid, regular, and punctual meditation practice with love and devotion.

While those who successfully struggle against their own weaknesses may not become rich and famous, more importantly, they will become spiritually mature. Spiritual maturity is not based on talent, beauty, or wealth. It isn't earned by being better than other people, but by being better than we ourselves used to be. Spiritual maturity is not glitzy. The spiritually mature person no longer relies on reactions from others to determine what is right, but on that inner yardstick that only asks: Will this take me closer to the Lord? Will it help me associate with him more?

The goal of our spiritual path is the realization of our own true self, our deep connection to the Divine. It is all about association with truth – truth not as a concept, but as love, life, an inner path or way that starts with the physical Master and ends in the innermost depths of our own being. The truth is the inner Satguru, the Shabd, the holy spirit that takes the measure of the soul's purity and, when the soul is pure and the karmic coverings have cleared, blends it within itself. We then become aware of our connection to the Divine.



Invest Smart

“Return on Investment” or ROI is a well-known concept in economics. The theory helps evaluate whether we will get the benefit of our capital or labour in a given context. It encompasses our modern, capitalistic outlook, where we do everything based on expected gain. In some ways, it is the opposite of what we’re taught in spirituality – to act selflessly, with no care for reward.

But if, hypothetically, we apply ROI to our life in a deeper way, it offers a refreshing view on our actions. What really gives us valuable returns on the effort we put into this life? Is it wealth and luxury? Power? Fame? Good deeds?

Maharaj Charan Singh writes in *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. I:

Our most precious wealth is Nam. This is the one kind of wealth we should accumulate. Unlike other wealth it remains eternally with us.... We should, therefore, carry on Nam Bhakti with abiding love, implicit faith and unswerving devotion. Then we will break asunder the chains that bind us tightly to the wheel of incarnation and death. Then we will end the recurring misery of endless lives and attain everlasting peace and bliss. Then the long separated drop will merge in the ocean and become the ocean. Then our soul will meet the Lord and gain liberation from the pairs of opposites forever.

We must distinguish between what will stay with us forever and what will be taken away from us when we leave this world. The saints tell us that anything that is not permanent is maya, illusion. All the sensual offerings of the world are nothing but illusions, designed to keep us trapped in the cycle of transmigration. All the time and effort we invest in acquiring worldly possessions merely strengthens our attachments and tightens our shackles. In other words, excessive worldly pursuits are a bad investment that will only cause us more pain and keep us separated from the Lord.

The saints tell us that the course of our life and our well-being depend more on how we react to your conditions than the conditions themselves. The Covid pandemic has undoubtedly caused immense loss and suffering, yet many devotees talk about it as a blessing. We probably have been

spending more time at home, with less freedom to socialize, go to the cinema or attend parties. This means we have had more time to give to our meditation and to discern what we really need in our lives and what we can do without.

We tend to place a lot of importance on our possessions and our objective reality, but if we think about it, we realize that those don't make us happy. The urban billionaire may commute in air-conditioned luxury, eat fine foods, wear expensive clothes and procure the best of everything for his children. He may have spent his entire life chasing wealth, status and possessions to the point of exhaustion. The burden of responsibilities and the fear of losing what he has – social status, money, health, the well-being of his children – is crushing. Often, those with the most wealth and status are the most lost in terms of finding life's deeper meaning.

Clearly, the Lord knows what is best for us. We have been given the eternal wealth of Nam, enabling us to return to the Lord once and for all. Applying the concept of ROI to our meditation can refresh our outlook on how we invest our time and attention. What do we give to meditation as compared to what it gives to us? By simply sitting still and repeating the names the Master has given us, we are doing more for our betterment than we have done in eons. We not only grow spiritually but also become capable of tackling the world with a sense of courage and balance. Our frayed minds begin to settle down, and we see things for what they are. We learn how to become good human beings. Even a few minutes of simran during times of distress and the cleansing effect of the Shabd offer immense solace, what to say of a lifetime of devoted meditation.

The Great Master elucidates our spiritual goal in *Spiritual Gems*:

The audible life stream which we call Shabd is the everlasting form of the Lord and is always within every one of us.... The function of Shabd is to lift the soul up; but it cannot perform this function until the mind and soul concentrate at the focus of the eyes.... It is by means of repetition of the five holy names – while keeping the attention between the eyes – that the currents of the soul gradually leave the body and collect behind the eyes.... No external circumstances can obstruct the progress of the soul.

We must slowly withdraw our scattered attention from the senses. It is said that if a disciple takes a single step toward the Master, the Master takes a hundred steps toward the disciple. We must stop deferring our meditation for later, when our business is established or our children are married. We will get whatever is in our destiny and must resign ourselves to his will. As Baba Ji tells us, we must fulfill our spiritual duties *despite* worldly conditions and troubles.

Yes, we all go through phases while on the path of devotion. We falter. Sometimes we get caught in a wave of karma and question our faith. Maybe we drift away from regular meditation. But we must never lose heart. The Master does not let us stray beyond where he can pull us back. We must persist, keep our devotion intact and invest smart.



Finding Hope

The turmoil of the global pandemic has brought feelings of sadness and despair. The history of the world speaks of other such disasters: wars, atrocities and human suffering even worse than pandemics. We might read about them, feel sorry, offer to help and then carry on with our lives.

But when personal tragedy strikes? The grief from the death of a child or spouse, the loss of a job or a diagnosis of a serious illness often overwhelms us with depression and anxiety, and we feel helpless. Some of us may even lose faith and blame our Master, thinking: “How can he let this happen to me?” We may see no way out, no hope, no solution. But when we are in enough pain, we may cry out to him within: “Help me please!”

In that moment of desperation, a ray of hope may pierce our hungry heart. Our losses remain, but if we are attentive and turn to the Lord within, we can attune ourselves to his presence, to the creative power of the Shabd – our real Master that is guiding us from inside. This is the source of all hope – and love.

Our Master repeatedly tells us to turn inward and seek spiritual help and support within. When we acknowledge his presence, he will be there. Maharaj Sawan Singh writes in *Spiritual Gems*: “Satguru is always present with you in Shabd Form. He sees, he knows and responds.”

To ensure that we don't fall into hopelessness and despair in the face of worldly troubles, we need to cling to God by remembering him, not only in our meditation but throughout the day. We do this through mental repetition of the five holy names. This remembrance is how we develop love and devotion for our Master.

In *Legacy of Love*, the author describes an evening meeting when Maharaj Charan Singh answered foreign guests' questions:

A lady got up and said over and over again to him, “I love you, I love you, I love you.” Maharaj Ji did not interrupt her. When eventually she had emptied her heart, he responded simply, “Sister, you didn't say ‘only.’”

The Master is a jealous lover; he expects us to love only him, not the world and its objects. He needs to be everything to us, an integral part of

our lives. We can talk to him as if he were right in front of us; laugh and cry as much as we want before him, sharing with him all our joys and sorrows. We can take him with us when we go shopping, to our jobs, to the gym. In the end, we need to treat him as our best friend, because that's what he is. Others will leave us eventually, or we will leave them – that is the nature of worldly relationships. But he has always been with us because he is the Shabd, and our soul is part of that power of love.

As Maharaj Jagat Singh writes in *The Science of the Soul*, “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.” If we trust him completely and obey his will, he will guide us and show us the right way, giving us the strength and confidence to go through our problems without losing our balance.

We trust him and obey his will by making meditation our priority and building our lives around it. Regular meditation replaces fear with faith and uncertainty with confidence.

We need not lose hope if we have made no apparent inner progress, or even if we have given up or deviated from the path. There is hope for all of us, all the time. As Baba Ji always tells us, the Lord is a forgiving father. So, we should not worry about our mistakes but just continue with our meditation. As Hazur wrote in *Spiritual Perspectives*:

When we are working our way up, we are in tune with him, and we will also get happiness in this world. If we forget him, this whole world becomes a place of agony and misery for us. We will get happiness only in his devotion.



Our Golden Age

How long our soul has languished in this creation is a mystery we probably will never unravel. By divine design, the universe is in the hands of the Supreme Being. Ancient mythologies describe a sequence of four repeating ages, known as the golden, silver, bronze (or copper) and iron ages, or yugas, through which the physical universe passes. Each successive age is characterized by decreasing levels of morality and spiritual awareness and shorter lifespans.

In the golden age, truth predominates; the physical universe spiritually uplifts its inhabitants; and human beings are deeply conscious of the Divine – its presence and will – in all things. It is like a cosmic springtime in which people live peacefully and harmoniously for lifetimes that last several thousand years.

Next comes the silver age, when external religious observances like charity and sacrifice are introduced. Then comes the bronze or copper age, with spirituality declining more as man begins to seek God through external worship. The last age of the cycle – the darkest and most miserable, full of discord and strife – is the iron age, where we find ourselves today. Human lives are comparatively short, and people are filled with negative emotion and aggression. The mind has taken hold of our every thought and action, dragging the poor soul in all directions, ever farther from its divine source.

But the saints tell us that all is not lost; these worst of times might be the best of times for us. Soami Ji writes in one of his poems:

*The three ages of gold, silver and copper have passed
without any of us knowing the method of Shabd practice.
In the Iron Age, Radha Soami, in his mercy,
has openly made known the secret of Shabd.*

Even though we are experiencing a grim, disastrous iron age, a living Master has revealed himself to us and shown us the secret of meditation on the Shabd. Masters have made themselves accessible, traveling all over the world to tell us about the path of self- and God-realization. Their teachings have been published and distributed worldwide in dozens of languages.

Even in the time of a global pandemic, the present Master has made himself available to us via technology and in person. These blessings that come in the present iron age allow it to become our personal golden age, when truth can predominate in our lives; when we can create a spiritually uplifting environment and become deeply conscious of the divine presence and will in all things; when we can live harmonious, tranquil lives in which we meditate to reach the Shabd at the eye centre and journey back to our true home with the Lord.

A golden age here and now, in the midst of such darkness? How can this be? Think of it this way: in a world of duality, if we have not seen ugliness, how can we appreciate beauty? What does light mean unless we compare it to darkness? It is the very state of duality that makes us yearn for something better. Perhaps we would never have thought of the Lord or embraced the path of Sant Mat if we weren't so dissatisfied with and disillusioned by life in this dark, iron age.

But what are we doing with this gift? Have we embraced the struggle to escape our attachments, go through the ups and downs of life without complaint, fight the mind's inclination to be swayed, deceived, and pulled by the senses and sense pleasures? Is meditation our highest priority?

The Lord created humans as the top of creation. Through his grace and mercy, humans can realize the Lord through meditation and reach the eye centre, where the Shabd is constantly ringing. Only humans are granted the gift to ride that wave of sound and light back to our true home. This journey is not easy. It takes time and effort and requires us to reshape our lives. It's the struggle of a lifetime. How do we embrace this struggle? What can help us put in the time and effort it takes to make our meditation what the present master calls the primary work of our life?

First, we might try cultivating a spiritual perspective and an attitude of faith.

From a spiritual perspective, we are blind. If we could see, we would perceive the dream nature of this world. In a dream, we don't try to make things happen. We must let go because there is nothing to hold on to. One of the hardest lessons for us to learn is that our life is unfolding under the absolute control of the Satguru, who is the Shabd.

As Baba Jaimal Singh wrote to his beloved disciple Maharaj Sawan Singh (the Great Master) in *Spiritual Letters*:

Whatever is to be done has already been done, and that is what will happen – man does not do anything by himself.... Whatever is to happen has already happened.... The Satguru will be with you wherever you go.... You are my dearly beloved child; you will go to Sach Khand in my company.

With such assurances from the Satguru, why would we worry about anything in this life? If we are concerned about anything, it should be only whether we are keeping the vows we promised our Master at initiation – everything else is just a part of the karmic accounts we have to pay. Grateful acceptance of the Lord's will can help us to embrace the struggle. We must keep trying, even though our efforts sometimes seem ineffectual. We are waging a battle to subdue the wily, obstinate mind.

Our attitude should be one of faith and devotion – and patience. We must give time to meditation without expecting any outward signs of progress. Results are not in our hands. We must persevere; we must persist, even in the face of what we think is failure.

Meditation is how we can express gratitude to our Master. It is how we purify our minds. If we do our meditation every day, striving to live in the Lord's will, remembering that he is always with us and that our true essence is the soul – a particle of the Divine – then we can escape our endless journey through the ages of the universe and experience our very own golden age.



A Stepping Stone

Baba Ji tells us that our actions are all need-based. The reason we are ready to follow the Master's directives and put in the required effort is because we feel the need to find something more meaningful in life. Our soul craves the experience of love and oneness it once knew. We need happiness beyond the fleeting pleasures of the senses, a life that will not end in separation, and truth behind the changing phenomena we are immersed in. Unable to fulfill these needs here, we barely recognize our longing for deeper meaning in life.

Encountering the Master sheds light on our vague discontent, giving us a glimpse of love and compassion so profound it delights our soul. The sublime sense of peace and holiness we experience in his presence stirs us deeply. And that which has been missing in our life is illuminated – a love that embraces all, that is joy, compassion, serenity. Love that gives and comforts. Love that is our essence and at the core of life itself. In the Master's presence, our intangible longing is clarified. We want what he has; we want the knowledge of truth that he possesses.

The saints tell us that our thirst for the divine is essential for our journey back to the Creator. Great Master, in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. II, calls this intense longing “a stepping-stone, over which a seeker has to tread to attain communion with the Lord.”

To describe the longing for God experienced by the saints, authors often refer to *bireh*, a condition in which the lovers are so in love with the Beloved that they merge with him and see him everywhere. They do not want to be separated from their love even for a moment.

This yearning to meet God is not reserved for saints. We are told we will all experience that depth of love once we have conquered the mind and lost ourselves in his presence within. Until then, our longing cleanses the mind and attunes it to the needs of the soul.

Maharaj Jagat Singh states in *The Science of the Soul*: “Intense yearning for the Lord is the primary prerequisite, for it is this that purifies and strengthens the mind.” Given the importance of this longing, how can we increase it? The answer, of course, is meditation. To understand how

meditation increases our longing to meet God, let us consider how the Masters define the soul.

In *The Science of the Soul*, Maharaj Jagat Singh also writes:

Almighty God is the Ocean of consciousness and Bliss, the Word (God in Action) is a wave of the Ocean, and the soul is a drop thereof... On reaching Par Brahm, one experiences that God is Infinite and Eternal, that He is the Life and Light in all – All is He and All is from Him – and that Almighty God, the Word and the Soul are of the same essence.

If our soul is of the same essence, having the same properties as God, then it is by nature infinite and eternal. If God is love, then our soul's essential quality is love. Being a drop of the ocean of God, the soul is consciousness and bliss. Is it any wonder our soul is unhappy here, longing to experience the eternal life and light that it shares with the Lord? While trapped in a human body (what to say of bodies of other species in previous lives), the soul is nearly powerless to express itself; we have allowed our consciousness to become enslaved by the mind, an apparatus that craves the pleasures our senses provide. For countless lifetimes we have trained this inanimate tool of the mind – our body – to dominate our attention while repressing our divine consciousness.

Since it is our soul that yearns to return to the Lord, we must learn to tune in to that silent, pure self that lies behind the stream of thoughts and impressions: our consciousness. Gaining control of our mind through simran allows us to reach the conscious awareness central to our being. Without the perpetual distraction of the mind's activity, the soul regains its power to influence our thoughts and actions.

Taking control of the mind is a formidable struggle, no doubt, but with the help of the Master, it can be done. The soul has its own power, and once awakened and no longer constrained by the mind's dominance, it will regain its authority over the mind.

To increase our longing for the love our soul needs, we must remove the impediment that blocks that love – the mind. Once removed, our soul will do the rest. Our pure consciousness needs no incentive, no training, no inspiration. It knows what it wants. And meditation is the key to the

realization of that desire. Concentrated simran will still the body and silence the unsolicited current of thoughts, enabling us to hear the Shabd. Attention to the sound current will flood the mind with the Creator's energy, cleansing it of accumulated karma.

When the Lord determines we are sufficiently cleansed and worthy of his presence, he will lift the inner veil, releasing our souls to travel within. Our intense longing for him has brought us into the company of the Master, where we will ultimately lose ourselves and merge into the love and bliss of the Creator. This will fulfill the yearning that has haunted us since we left him. From the stepping stone of intense longing for his love, we have travelled within, overcome the mind and made the final leap to our destination – awareness of our oneness with the Creator.



Rest Awhile

When people asked Hazur Maharaj Charan Singh about their struggles in meditation, his answer to their plight could generally be boiled down to two words: “more meditation.” On one of the Q&A sessions on the website, a woman recounts all her difficulties slogging through meditation, and Hazur said he could share a very secret answer with her – “meditation.” Everyone cracked up laughing.

This is the consistent advice from the Masters. It seems to be the consistent advice from spiritual teachers the world over. From the early Christian mystics known as the “Desert Fathers” we read:

*A monk came to Abba Sisoës and said:
“What should I do Abba,
for I have fallen from grace?”
And he replied, “Get up again.”
The monk came back shortly after and said:
“What shall I do now, for I have fallen again?”
And the old man said to him,
“Just get up again.
Never cease getting back up again!”*

In other words, the only solution to distracted, discouraging meditation is more meditation. For monks in early Christian monasteries, studying, repeating and pondering sayings such as this one was part of their daily spiritual discipline. Hundreds of these sayings were gathered into manuals of instruction for the monks. Each day, along with their times of prayer and silent, inner contemplation, they would take one such saying to memorize in the morning and then to repeat and muse over all day. We can imagine ourselves when meditation has been difficult remembering over and over, “Just get up again. Never cease getting back up again!”

Yet, when we are exhausted from battling an enemy who simply doesn't give an inch, how do we find the enthusiasm to take up the only solution the Masters offer – more meditation? We might find a helpful suggestion in another of the sayings the monks studied and repeated. This one comes from the early Christian mystic, John of Dalyutha:

*If you are tired and worn out
by your labours for your Lord,
place your head upon his knee and rest awhile.
Recline upon his breast,
breathe in the fragrant spirit of life,
and allow life to permeate your being.
Rest upon him, for he is a table of refreshment
that will serve you the food of the divine Father.*

John of Dalyutha's advice sounds different, but is actually the same as that given by our Masters: "If you are tired and worn out by your labours for your Lord" – that is, meditation – do more meditation. For how else can we, metaphorically, place our head upon the Lord's knee other than through meditation? Isn't meditation throwing our exhausted and weary selves on his mercy and "reclining upon his breast"?

Sometimes, when our two and a half hours of meditation has been a vivid and convincing illustration of what the saints mean when they say we are mere slaves – slaves of the mind, willingly dancing to its tune – and we're feeling dry, desolate and discouraged, it might help to hold on to the image of meditation as a place of rest and refuge. The idea behind the monks devoting an entire day to pondering one saying was to go deeper and deeper into its meaning, seeing how it applied directly to their own struggles on the spiritual path.

So, we might wonder: Why do the Masters tell us that the only solution to dry, uninspired meditation is more meditation? Why do they say the only solution to restless, jumpy, let-me-out-of-here meditation is more meditation? Because, as John of Dalyutha puts it, it is in that meditation practice that we can "breathe in the fragrant spirit of life."

Caught in the vast and tangled net of the world, driven by our karmic script, and reacting to every sensory input, we're not alive. As slaves of the mind, we are like the walking dead. All day we play the part we've been assigned in the drama of the ever-changing world around us, but our time of meditation is – or can be – a time to "rest awhile" and allow "life" to permeate our being. It is in meditation that we can be nourished. As John of Dalyutha puts it, if we want to enjoy the divine food at that "table of refreshment," we have to "rest upon him."



BOOK REVIEW

Spinoza: The Power of Clear Thinking

BY GEORGE TER WAL

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Spinoza: The Power of Clear Thinking presents the thought of Baruch Spinoza, a 17th-century Dutch philosopher. Exploring the connection between each individual and the all-encompassing reality, Spinoza came to believe that nothing exists but one supreme good, one substance, one reality, whether we call this God, Nature, or the Universe. He further sought to understand this reality, to know God, which for him required a deep intuition of truth, one by which, in his words, “the soul is changed.” He taught that the human being could achieve conscious communion with God: that “it belongs to the essence of the human mind” to gain knowledge of “the eternal and infinite essence of God” and to share in understanding the universe as God does, “from the viewpoint of eternity.”

Born into a Jewish family, Spinoza challenged both the Jewish and Christian religious orthodoxy of his day, and was eventually condemned as an atheist by theologians of both faiths. His ideas were radical for the culture in which he lived because he did not rely on revealed scriptures or religious rituals as the path to God. Further, according to the predominant thinking of his period, whether Jewish or Christian, God is understood to be transcendent, that is, apart from the creation and human beings. Yet, as the author describes it, for Spinoza

God... is not a person or a sovereign nor anything like a person or sovereign. God is an infinite being with an infinite power to act. God is an expression of perfection: of what is. Therefore everything that is, is in God. Every extended thing as well as every thought is in God, expressed by God, and conceived by God.

Though offered a university position that would have secured him wealth and status, he declined it, preferring freedom to work on his ideas and writing, earning his living as a lens grinder. To avoid controversy, he directed that his books be published only after his death. They were thereupon

immediately banned, but still circulated. Despised by theologians, he was much loved by his friends, followers, and students. Because of the way in which he explained his spiritual beliefs, people who had lost faith in religion, and even some who had become atheists, were inspired to follow the path to truth he delineated.

In describing Spinoza's ideas, the author of the book likens the connection between human beings and God to a ladder:

One end of the ladder rests in our heart or being and the other end of the ladder is in God, or Nature. For Spinoza, there are three rungs to this ladder which are levels of knowledge or understanding. The lowest rung of the ladder is ill-informed opinion, the middle is reasoning, and proper reasoning will eventually culminate in [the highest rung.] intuitive knowledge of God.

As the author explains, for Spinoza the ultimate human objective is

to reach that understanding that will bring us peace of mind. And when we realise – really realize – that all is in God's hand, that all is as it is meant to be, and when we realise that a better understanding of God means a better understanding of ourselves, this love of God occupies our whole mind and this love is the most constant of all emotions.

Spinoza wanted people to move away from cherished misconceptions toward accuracy and clarity in their thinking. In the manner of geometric proofs, he led his followers systematically through a series of logical arguments that, in his view, proved his theses.

Unlike many other philosophers, Spinoza believed that, in addition to logic and reasoning, emotions are necessary for understanding God. He thought that emotions follow universal laws of nature like everything else, and analyzed them “coolly and rationally, in the same way we analyze the three-dimensional physical world, with its lines, planes, or bodies.” Spinoza believed that because we lack understanding about how thoughts and emotions work, we are, in the author's words, passive victims “at the mercy of external causes, ... tossed about like the waves of the sea when driven by contrary winds, unsure of the outcome of our fate.” If we understand emotions as a natural process subject to science, we can be objective about them and develop a sense of being active rather than passive about the course of our lives.

Spinoza used the word *conatus* to describe the motivating power behind our thoughts and actions. Deep within ourselves, in our very essence, we are striving to do the best we can for ourselves. Spinoza saw this drive as a virtue that leads us to the highest level of understanding. Welling up from deep within our body, mind, and emotions, it moves us toward the state of freedom that we are trying to realize. The author writes: “Spinoza is clear that there is no virtue that precedes the conatus. The impetus for existence, for preserving ourselves, the conatus, lies at the root of everything. We could infer that the conatus is synonymous with our essence – with God.”

In a way, humanity’s path to freedom leads through clear understanding of the emotional causes of action. Our conatus – our core, our vital force – is covered with layers of emotions. For our conatus to express itself positively we have to understand these emotions. Are we really acting in our own best interest? The author states that, for Spinoza, “understanding the emotions, including recognizing which of these emotions are to our advantage, offers us a glimpse of what it is to be free.”

While Spinoza understood that we can be bound by negative emotions, he was interested in “exalted” emotions like joy and blessedness that were “positive and empowering.” He emphasized that “emotions cannot be curbed other than by opposite and stronger emotions.” Because we are emotional beings, we cannot repress our emotions; rather we must use positive emotions to cultivate a sense of agency, not passivity. Spinoza believed that positive emotions play an important role in understanding God and therefore in increasing the fulfillment and happiness that eventually lead to bliss.

Spinoza is a very positive philosopher, a philosopher who says that an increase in real knowledge goes hand in hand with joy and pleasure – and that joy and pleasure are emotions which can be sufficiently powerful to overcome negative emotions. He is a philosopher for whom the object of his philosophy is not knowledge for its own sake but the bliss that results from higher knowledge or understanding and thus stronger and better emotions, up to and including eternal blessedness.

The experience of unity with God is one of bliss but also ultimate love. As the author explains, “Love is the essence of Spinoza’s God: God may not love us as another person would, but he is ... wholly and eternally loving.”

In sum, Spinoza's goal was to search for that which is truly good and to guide his followers to that goodness. He used a logical, mathematical approach while honouring and harnessing positive human emotions. Although he was accused of being an atheist, he sought a true and deep understanding of God that transcended the religious views of his time.

I resolved at length to enquire whether there existed a true good, one which was capable of communicating itself and could alone affect the mind to the exclusion of all else, whether, in fact, there was something whose discovery and acquisition would afford me a continuous and supreme joy to all eternity.

Science of the Soul Research Centre plans to publish more books on some of the world's greatest philosophers and how they have sought ultimate truth through clear thinking and reasoning.



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