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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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When Will I...?

*When will I be free from delusions of the mind?
When will I be free from service to various people,
so that I may devote myself to
the repetition of the Name of the Lord,
who is beyond delusion?*

*When will my eyes, like a rain-bird,
savour the delicious drops
from the cloud of the imperishable Abode?*

*When will I view my body with tranquil dispassion
and be absorbed in pure meditation
with serene calmness?*

*When will I firmly hold within my heart
my Guru's commandments at all times?*

*When will I be rid of my propensity
to accumulate wealth and,
obtaining the secrets of spirituality, attain bliss? ...*

*With firm conviction, carry on the repetition of
the holy names.*

*Listen, O wise ones! All your endeavours
will be accomplished.*

The Essence of Jainism



Our True Identity

It is sometimes interesting to ask the most basic of questions, because we take many things so much for granted that we seldom actually think about them in any meaningful way. One example of this is to ask, “Who am I?”

If we look at our life experiences – the many people that we have known, the many activities in which we were involved, our work, our studies, the many places that we’ve been – do these describe who we are? If you meet someone, one of the first things they want to know is what you do, as if that will tell them all they need to know about you. Others want to know your astrological sign, as though that holds all the answers to your true identity.

But if we look at our lives in these terms, as measured by these parameters we are not really looking at ourselves, nor getting any meaningful information as to who we are. It is a little like looking at a star. Do we actually see the star? No, that star’s light took years to get here, and only now do we see it. That star could have ceased to exist, it could have blown up, but still, here we are looking at what we think is a star.

The fact is that we’re looking at that star as it was several years ago, depending on how long it took for its light to reach us. For example, the closest star to us is Proxima Centauri, and is over four light years away, which means that if it blew up, we would only know about it in four years’ time. So, when we look at the night sky, we are actually looking at the past.

Similarly, if we look at the measurable, observable parameters of our lives, what we see does not describe us as we are now. What we are looking at is a karmic pattern. This pattern was constructed from our actions over many lifetimes and assigned to this life, so, for example, we meet a particular person at a particular point in our lives; we are steered towards studying certain things at certain times; we are given this job at that time and another job at a different time. And so on.

We get confused and think these were all decisions that we have made now, in the time frame of our current life. But that is a mistake. Actually, these things happen according to the particular karmic pattern that is assigned to us and which we brought with us into this life.

So, we get back to the first question: who are we really? What constitutes the real being that is us? This is where it gets tricky, because it is not something that can be adequately expressed in words. What we are is beyond the measurable parameters of ordinary life, deeper than mere psychology and so much more than the sum of our actions.

Behind the layers of mind and the illusion that envelopes us is something that one could probably label as 'being.' Our being is what is left when we strip away the karmic pattern of our destiny and the veneer of our cultivated and learned behaviours. It exists independently of all that and all our history, associations, relationships and professions. It merely is, and it is beautiful beyond measure.

This same being is the true nature that all of us discover when we dive beneath the superficialities and the attributes that the world uses to label us. It is called Soul.

This is the ground zero of our existence; it is this essence of being that is our true identity, and it is immortal. It is the reality and the truth behind the smoke and mirrors of our everyday life; it is our inexpressible self. And it is this self that yearns for a higher reality than the everyday, ordinary life that we are living in this world.

The soul is the true child of God that will not, cannot rest until it returns to the ancient original home that it left so long ago. It is this inner restlessness that has driven us to seek for answers beyond the ordinary and the commonplace, and has taken us to the feet of the living Master who has blessed us with initiation.

Our inner truth has brought us to the feet of the Master and it is the expression of this certainty within that drives us even now in our search for the highest truth and the fulfilment of our spiritual destiny, which is for this long-lost soul to return to the house of the Father, to reunite with him and rest finally in a state of indescribable and eternal bliss.



The Power of the Words

Some time ago the BBC ran a programme about the healing power of mantras. It gave the findings of researchers who concluded that, with our modern lifestyle, we've created a psychological environment that's not good for us. We're constantly reacting to outside pressures that cause us stress, or we're trying to live up to expectations of others or even ourselves. And when that's not possible, we become angry or anxious and depressed.

During their research, two women studied the brain activity of a group of people who were saying a mantra (any kind of mantra), and found that this was making them calm and reducing stress, anxiety and depression.

We may find parallels here to our own practice of our five words of simran given to us by our Master. What may not be obvious though – especially if our own simran is shaky and sporadic – is the potential for good that comes with the repetition of those five words.

No matter how long we've been on the path, it's surprising how many of us battle to keep our simran running, not just during meditation, but during the whole day. We do repeat it whenever we remember, but often that's because we feel it's our duty. If we haven't made it a habit, we often forget. And then we miss the benefits our simran brings.

The study found that on average the mind produces 60,000 thoughts a day. As we know, it's well-nigh impossible for us to stop our minds from thinking. But, the study found, by repeating a mantra it *does* become possible, at least for that time.

Now, let's relate this to our own simran. Why is there such emphasis on repeating our words? Originally, the soul was one with its Creator, but then it was sent down into lower regions. Eventually it had to take on the company of mind. The Masters tell us it became knotted together with the mind.

We're told that in this partnership of the mind and the soul, the mind is initially the stronger of the two. At this time, the mind has made the soul subservient to it – even though it draws its power from the soul. We are also told that we have to facilitate the soul reclaiming its power back from the mind. That's a really big ask.

However, when we're initiated by a true Master, he gives us a weapon to overcome the domination of the mind. That weapon is our simran. And what it has to do is bring the mind in check and direct the attention inward to the eye centre. That's our duty for this lifetime.

In the first volume of *Spiritual Perspectives* Hazur Maharaj Ji answers questions about the mind. He makes it clear that at our level, the mind is totally in control. And if the soul is going to make any headway in its journey towards its true home, it's got to work through the mind.

Somebody asks Hazur Maharaj Ji, "As I walk through this world and live from day to day, that's mind?" "That is mind," Maharaj Ji says, "100 percent mind."

But what about when we're meditating? The questioner asks if it's mind or soul that gives us the will to sit to meditate. "Mind," Maharaj Ji says. The person then asks, "So there is actually no action in this world from the soul?" "No," Maharaj Ji says, "No."

In a way this is quite frightening. If the soul is so totally under the sway of the mind, how is it supposed to fight the mind – if even our very efforts to meditate are under the control of the mind?

Then Maharaj Ji tells this person that meditation means that we are training our mind to go inward and upward, withdrawing it from outside and bringing it back to the eye centre. And of course, the mind is going to fight us. What chance do we have of winning this David-versus-Goliath battle?

Ah, but this is where our simran comes in. Whenever we manage to say our words with attention, for that little time our mind is in check. And even in our meditation – which our *mind* is allowing us to do – if we can keep our attention in our simran, for that time we are slowly training our mind to turn inward.

But, of course, training the mind to turn inward means working to hold the attention at the eye centre. Letting the mind flit around while we try to get in the odd round of simran is not going to get us very far. So, how to achieve this focused attention? The author of *Living Meditation* tells us:

The first step in meditation is to place simran at the eye centre. It takes a deliberate act to extract our mind from its involvement with its thoughts.

We have to take our mind away from its thinking and consciously contain it in simran.

This deliberate effort to focus the mind in its repetition of the words is important. We have to do it right from the start of our meditation. And come to think of it, it's not difficult to keep our focus for one round of simran, and then focus on the next, and on the next. It also helps to focus on each individual word. The moment we start rattling off the words mechanically, it leaves the mind free to go back to its thoughts.

Maharaj Jagat Singh had this to say about the way we think: "Satsangis should form the habit of 'thinking' – clear thinking." And it's true – most of the time we just act, without stopping to think about what we're doing. So, we should keep a watch on the mind. We may be shocked to realize that most of the time it's mulling over trivialities. Or else it's worrying about something.

We all worry. And perhaps, some time or another, we may have had the following kind of experience. We were confronted with a problem that seemed so huge we didn't know what to do about it. In desperation we started saying our words, out of a real need for our Master's help. And then, suddenly we felt calm.

And in that moment we saw that these were not just unfamiliar words. They really did have power. Let's remind ourselves of what Great Master revealed about simran. This is from the first volume of *Philosophy of the Masters*: "The names that a Master imparts... are also energy-charged and help the transference of spiritual energy to the disciple."

In that conversation recorded in *Spiritual Perspectives* that we looked at earlier, Hazur Maharaj Ji says something interesting. He'd been saying that everything that we do at this level is through the mind. And the questioner then asks: "So the mind, which sometimes hates to sit in meditation, is forcing itself to sit in meditation?" "That's mind," says Maharaj Ji. "The mind also is not happy in this creation. The mind also... becomes miserable after some time in the sensual pleasures. It also wants more peace, more happiness."

This is a real revelation: that the mind is unhappy here and wants to be free of its enslavement to the senses. And if it can find better happiness by leaving this world of misery, it will start to turn inward at the eye centre.

But this is just the start of the inner journey. The simran still needs to continue. It needs to reach a point of concentration that will reveal the beautiful Radiant Form of the Master himself. It will also bring the soul to an awareness of its true spiritual identity. Even after the attention has entered the eye centre, the simran should continue.

Baba Jaimal Singh, the Guru of Hazur Maharaj Sawan Singh, urged his disciple to keep doing his simran. Baba Jaimal Singh said that simran has a power of its own and through simran we are able to make contact with the Shabd. And in doing so, it can make the soul aware of the divine presence within. He wrote in a letter:

In simran at least there is no problem, my son, so keep doing it. Simran's current links up with the Dhun [the Sound], and the current of the Dhun links one with the Shabd – and Shabd is the very essence of the Anami Lord himself.

Spiritual Letters

It's Shabd that will carry the soul into the presence of the Lord himself, but it's our all-important simran that has to bring us to the Shabd.



Our Most Precious Commodity

There can be no keeping track of all the many, many hours of dedicated practice – over months and years – it must take for a pianist to achieve concert standard. It is an ongoing task. And the rewards are great. There is the satisfaction of a job well done and of using one's talent to the full. There is the thrill of playing magnificent music. There are the financial rewards. And, of course, there is public and critical acclaim and adulation.

It must be marvellous, even addictive, while it lasts. But time degrades most talent and skill. Fingers might stiffen with arthritis, memory might be less focused and the audience will probably transfer its loyalty to a younger artist. So what then? What remains when that crucial unavoidable date with death approaches? Will the memories and financial rewards help as life draws to a close? Can any of those hours of practice sustain and support a person through the death process? Can any of the adulation help as time races by? The answer to all of those questions is no.

To a greater or lesser extent, we are similar to the pianist. We might not have been so single-minded, so focused on one specific task or goal, but we will probably have spent most of our lives lavishing our attention on worldly activities, on worldly treasures – none of which will help us in the slightest when we face that final unknown event – death.

Attention is our most precious commodity. It is what we give, what we use, to accomplish worldly goals and tasks. Talent without attention cannot achieve a great deal. Attention is what we give to family, friends, careers, homes, gardens, hobbies and pets. Caring and nurturing requires attention.

The more important something is to us, the more attention, in the form of focused thoughts, we give it. These focused thoughts often translate into physical action, demonstrating the level of our care and commitment.

However, at the end of the day, will the objects and results of our attention help us in any way as death approaches? Unfortunately, no money in the bank, no worldly treasures, no family members can be with us through, and after, the death experience. But it is during this terrifyingly unfamiliar experience that we might need help and support the most. If we haven't found and focused on an appropriate

support during our lives, there is no guarantee that it will be there when we need it most.

Saint Paltu said: “Then death the leveller wipes out all you possess.” So, what are we to do? Is there anyone, or anywhere, we can turn to, to find the help we need?

There are, indeed, people who can advise us and guide us here and now on how to prepare for death. And what is more, they can be with us through the death experience, and their loving guidance continues even after death. These extraordinary guides are true, living Masters – mystics who have achieved oneness with our Creator.

Maharaj Charan Singh is quoted in *Living Meditation*:

Our real Master is the Word, the Logos, Shabd, Nam, the audible Life Stream or whatever name one may choose to give it. The Master is that Power manifested in human form.

A true living Master is God’s representative on earth, and he has travelled the road back home to God on an ongoing basis taking souls home, which is his principal mission on earth.

The Master grants to certain souls the priceless gift of initiation, and from that moment onwards is always with them, in his Shabd presence, watching over and guiding them every step of the way. Again we refer to Maharaj Charan Singh (as quoted in *Living Meditation*): “The Master not only guides and helps during the disciple’s lifetime, but stays with him even at the time of his death, and afterwards.”

The Master’s mission is to take initiated souls home to reunite with our heavenly Father. But we have a part to play in this process, and it is a crucial role. To fulfil this role we need to use that precious commodity – our attention. Our Master wants us to turn our attention away from worldly treasures and start to invest in heavenly treasure. Constant simran and focused meditation require the same thing – attention.

We have to divert our attention from its habitual haunts and instead focus it on the Master and on spiritual goals. He gives us simran as the means to this end. When he initiates us, the Master gives us those five holy words or names that we can use day and night to try to turn our thoughts, our attention, to him. In *Sar Bachan Poetry* we read:

*Keep the fear of death in your mind,
for who knows when that moment will arrive!
Stay alert with every breath of your life,
O thoughtless one,
and devote every moment to the repetition of the Name.*

This is the challenge that faces us all. This is the task we need to set our hearts and minds to with a degree of attention we have never exercised before. What is required of us is unbroken attention at the eye focus throughout the day and night. When the mind is not engaged in necessary worldly activities and thoughts, it has got to be in simran. Eventually, Masters tell us, the simran can go on even while we are engaged with the world.

This is the goal, and like all such goals, it will start with small, baby steps for most of us – where one single round of unbroken simran can be considered something of a triumph! There are so many worldly activities that have claimed our attention for so long that it is a monumental task to redirect it. But slow and steady will win the race, and the Master is always within us, watching and helping as we take our first, faltering steps.

There is no doubt that we are all in the exit lounge, simply waiting for him to call our flight that will mark the end of this present earthly existence. But we don't know where we are in the queue. Who knows when our Master will call our name? Will we be ready? Have we given him our attention and started to build our treasure in heaven?

Sant Tukaram said:

*Hurry up, don't waste time!
Don't postpone it until tomorrow;
don't waste a moment on anything.
Time is running short, you can be sure!*
Many Voices, One Song

We have been given so many gifts – human life; initiation by a true living Master; his constant presence in our lives; and his promise that we *can* do this job. So, what are we waiting for?

We know we have this priceless commodity called attention. Now is the time to put it to best possible use, by directing it in our Master's direction. Now is the time to give him what he wants most – our attention.



Decisive Effort

Whether an athlete competes against himself at a “personal best” level, at a team level, a country level, or on the world stage, the athlete’s goal is to win the “gold.” To achieve this goal athletes must bring their bodies to peak performance, which they do through discipline. They watch their diet; irrespective of the weather, they get up early every day to train; they stick to a schedule; they wear suitable clothing. But the most effective aspect of their training is that they listen to their coach and practise what the coach says.

The similarities to our spiritual practice are obvious – the difference lies in the goals: ours is liberation. Whatever the goal, to achieve success requires discipline and effort – two words we don’t like. Discipline suggests clipping our wings. It is synonymous with self-control or self-restraint. We say that we want freedom, but we appear to be reluctant to apply the self-control and effort needed to achieve it.

Effort generally means the exertion of physical or mental energy, denoting a determined attempt. The result of effort is achievement. We are regularly asked by the Master to put in the effort to do our meditation, but the word *effort* may indicate to us that meditation is an unpleasant task.

The terminology we use can affect our attitude. For example: sitting in meditation has everything to do with our attitude – with our mental disposition towards sitting – and whether we see it as a chore or as a pleasure. When we see meditation as a chore it takes effort to sit, and the simran is boring and dry. When we see meditation as a pleasure, the rhythm of simran is pleasing and the experience is enjoyable.

The effort required for meditation not only refers to the physical act of sitting in the posture; it equally applies to the mental effort we must exert. We must clip the wings of our thoughts, which takes discipline and determination.

When we consider meditation a chore, how many of us ever get past just thinking about doing it? Or, perhaps we get stuck in the deception of promising ourselves we will do it: “I can’t make do my meditation this morning, but from tomorrow, I am going to sit every morning!”

Then there's the fantasy of dreaming about doing it. Athletes will never win gold by simply thinking or dreaming about the gold medal. Their desire for it is so focussed, so strong, that they are regularly at the track putting effort into their training. Likewise, we need a strong desire to get to the actual *doing it* stage of meditation. This, coupled with a positive approach and a willingness to please our Master, is a perfect recipe for attending to meditation.

However, exhausted by the challenges associated with our material lives, we appear to have little energy left with which to generate enthusiasm for meditation – and the physical overrides the spiritual. The decision to turn this around lies with us. We have to put in the effort to discipline ourselves.

The more effort we put into our simran and bhajan, the more it will grow – and with its growth will come the realization that what we thought was unachievable is in fact achievable. With the Master's support, everything is achievable! But, how can we expect his support and his loving guidance if we are not doing our simran and bhajan? It is our effort to help ourselves that attracts his help and his grace.

We are caught in a net of worldly intrigue, which we ourselves have cast, and meditation is our opportunity to free ourselves. But first, we have to believe that there is a net, and that we are caught in it. This will determine the level of effort we put into fighting for our freedom.

As we struggle and flounder in our attempts to disentangle ourselves, the Master tirelessly guides us. He begs us to be still and allow him to slowly cut away the net, but our continued fascination and involvement with the world binds the net even tighter. At some stage, we *will* realize that if we follow his instructions – if we keep still and relinquish the world and our constant focus on it – we will be free.

Worldly thinking agitates the mind, which disturbs our meditation so that we cannot achieve the stillness and the required level of concentration that are so necessary. An essential part of our effort is to block these disruptive thoughts so that our repetition is able to continue uninterrupted. In *Spiritual Heritage* Hazur Maharaj Ji gives us the following advice:

With an absolutely relaxed mind, you should forget the whole world when you are sitting in meditation. Only you should exist and the Father should exist, and nothing else should exist between you.

This is the ideal, the perfect way to meditate. It is what we strive to achieve, and what makes all the effort worthwhile.

The basis of our meditation is repetition. Unstable and erratic repetition will cause our focus to oscillate, concentration will be minimal, and our meditation will not be successful.

There is a technique that could help here. Autosuggestion is a form of personal brain programming that uses positive thinking and repetition to achieve successful changes in one's thinking and attitude. Baba Ji constantly tells us to be positive – to think positively.

So, if we are experiencing problems with our simran, bhajan, and the practice of meditation in general, perhaps we need to infuse our meditation with a positive belief in what we are doing. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. I, Hazur Maharaj Ji tells us: “You have to take a positive step to attend to your meditation.”

Positivity and repetition are important aspects of meditation, through which we learn to control the mind. When we force the mind to do simran, rather than accept the worldly alternatives it wants to force on us, we are compelling the mind to accept a condition that we choose.

However, when we constantly repeat negative suggestions to our mind, we embed negativity into our thinking. When we repeatedly tell ourselves that we can't meditate; that it's difficult; that we don't like doing it; that we don't see results – we are reinforcing negative brain patterns which impact on our meditation. The more we neglect our meditation, the more difficult it becomes to sit and the more discouraged we become.

The author of *One Being One* writes:

To find the One within, requires great effort.

Paradoxically, for life to become effortless, striving is essential.

A major problem we experience with meditation is that our effort fluctuates – we are neither regular nor constant in our effort. The more the mind pulls our attention out, the more difficult it is to get back into the rhythm of simran, so that we end up focusing on worldly issues during

our practice. It may be time to supercharge our meditation with interest, enthusiasm, and a strong desire *to want to do it*. As Hazur Maharaj Ji says:

Every effort that we put in meditation is a step forward. Definitely we get its advantage, and we have its effect. Even if we devote five minutes, it is to our credit.

If our heart is in our meditation, we will put in the effort to do it – and do it correctly. While we may not like expending the effort to meditate, it is essential that we do, for as Sant Charandas tells us: “Effort is the true alchemy that turns an individual soul into the Supreme Being.”

No matter how much physical and mental effort athletes put into their sport, they will never win a prize of much value if they don’t believe in themselves. We should never underestimate the value of our effort, and we should never allow negativity to steal this wonderful opportunity from us. It is our effort that will earn us a place in the Master’s heart and turn our soul into the Supreme Being.



Our Mind Is Our Obstacle

Of all the obstacles that can trip us up on our path to spirituality, the greatest is our own mind – because its tendency is constantly downward and outward, seeking worldly pleasures through the senses. So, while all our attention and energy remain absorbed in seeking and indulging in worldly pleasures, this leaves no room for our attention to be focused on our soul and its awakening.

To refer to the mind as an obstacle or enemy is an understatement that underestimates the power of the mind and how formidable it is. To have a glimpse of its power, we have to understand that our soul, that is, our real self or our true essence, is controlled by the mind to such an extent that the soul's existence is for all intents and purposes obliterated. This means that the soul isn't acknowledged and, therefore, in our own sense of reality it doesn't exist.

The mind is in total control, and effectively, through controlling all our thoughts, determines what we do and how we see and experience everything. This means that our mind creates all our perceptions and perspectives and controls all our experiences. So, our mind creates our own reality, which is often different from what others experience.

What does it mean for us to have our mind in control? Simplistically, it means that our mind makes all our choices and decisions. This leads to our desire to satisfy all of our senses and sensual desires, which in turn, means our attention is always externally focused – making it virtually impossible to take our attention within. Does this mean that we are doomed to failure? On the surface it would appear to be so. But this would only be correct if we didn't have a more powerful antidote or remedy.

The antidote we are given is a unique form of meditation, which is designed to use the attributes of the mind to gradually tame it and bring it under the control of the soul. The emphasis here is on *gradually*! When one considers that we've been in the creation since it began millions of years ago, and our mind has, for these millions of years, been driving our attention outward into the creation, it would be unreasonable to expect an overnight reversal of the mind's inclination or behaviour. The meditation technique uses the attributes of the mind to seek a pleasure that is better

than the sensual pleasures, so that the mind gradually reverses its focus from outward to inward.

So, in effect, we do not fight the enemy, we merely win the enemy over through giving it what it wants and enjoys – pleasure. But the pleasure is inward; experience of the Shabd, mesmerizes the mind and keeps its attention inward instead of outward.

We have embarked on a journey of transformation – we are transitioning from being disciples of the mind to becoming disciples of spirituality and the Master. This means we have made a conscious decision to leave one master and adopt a new Master – the Shabd Master. Any transition from one master to another is no easy matter and not as simple as flicking a switch.

Although we were not previously conscious that we were disciples of the mind, we unconsciously followed the mind and its dictates for millions of years. The mind, having been our master for so long, is not going to let its old faithful disciple switch allegiance so easily,

Fortunately for us, there is an incentive for the mind in this transition. Just as the soul is restless in this world and wants to escape it, so too, the mind is also restless. All the pleasures it seeks here are so temporary and short-lived that it has to constantly seek new pleasures to be happy. Instead of depriving the mind of the pleasures it seeks, we offer the mind the better, permanent pleasure of the Shabd. With this incentive, the mind can be conquered. But to do this, we have to take our attention to the eye centre and hold it there, so that the mind can taste the better pleasure that lies within.

However, to achieve this monumental change, we have to put in the effort. Meagre effort will result in meagre change and significant effort will result in significant change. The choice is ours.

Of course, any effort we put in towards avoiding indulgence in sensual pleasures will also contribute greatly to our goal. It would be futile if, on the one hand we try to turn the mind inward with meditation and on the other hand, we indulge our senses and keep our attention outward. This is perhaps one area we need to examine if we feel we are not making any noticeable progress in our meditation. Are we taking several steps back for every step we take forward? Only we know the answer to this question.

When we learn of the time, attention and devotion the spiritual Masters have dedicated to achieve their goal, what should we expect to achieve with the efforts we are currently putting in? Unfortunately, we are oblivious of what lies within us and who we truly are. Due to our ignorance of what our soul is and of the spiritual wealth that lies within us, we assume we are this body and nothing more – because presently that is all we can perceive.

Spirituality is an awakening. It teaches us that we are more than the body and how we can realize the soul. What an illusion it is to think we are one thing – the body – when we are indeed something totally different – the soul.

Soul is within each one of us and therefore, to realize the soul, nothing has to be implanted within us or given to us. It's similar to love. No one puts love into us or teaches us to love. Love is always within us, and only when we learn to give love will it be awakened or realized by us. Hazur Maharaj Ji said that love is the only thing that cannot diminish when we give it. The more we give love, the more it grows.

Since we don't know that we are the soul, neither do we know how to access or realize the soul. We therefore need a spiritual Master to show us how to awaken our realization of who we are and how to develop a relationship with God.

The Master explains to us that our attention is currently dissipated through the senses into the world, and the only way to withdraw our attention from the world and take it to the eye centre is through Shabd meditation. This unique meditation is taught to us by the Master. It is designed to gather all our scattered attention from throughout the body and the senses and gradually focus it and concentrate it at the eye centre – which is our responsibility. The Master, who is one with the Shabd, will then draw the soul and mind inwards and upwards through the astral and causal regions.

If we are truly serious about spirituality, we have to make the mind our greatest ally, and we can do this only through Shabd meditation.

Great Master said:

The mind is wayward. It cannot be curbed and brought under control except through hard labour... The disciple who works hard at his meditation, earns the special grace of the Master, who is always ready to help him.

Regularity and punctuality in meditation should be adopted by every student of this science. Keep sitting in meditation, even if you fail to achieve concentration. This is the remedy for all your ills. Ceaseless effort will be crowned with success; if not today, a few days later.



Why Not Submit to the Master?

Let's think about two really important subjects: what do we truly know, and how much control do we have over our lives?

Given our intellectual development, we might think that we know an awful lot. But the real question is not what we know *about*, but what we know first-hand, from personal experience. An illustration would be if someone said that they knew how to drive a car because they had read a book on the subject – would we want to be a passenger in a car with such a driver?

For satsangis, our primary interest in life is the spiritual path and making progress on it. So let's look at four of the most important components of the spiritual path and then see how much we actually know about them.

First, God exists, and he is central to most spiritual systems. But do we have any idea of who and what God is? If we are entirely honest, we must admit that we have very little, if any, direct knowledge of him. It's true that we can say a lot *about* him, such as he is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent. We could also say that he is immortal, and that he created everything. But, does this give us any real knowledge of who and what God is? We are forced to admit that it does not. God is *entirely* beyond us. And to try to know God when one is still within the domain of mind is absurd, since it is obviously impossible to know what is beyond mind by means of the mind. It simply cannot be done.

Second, there is Shabd or Nam – terms that are perhaps used very lightly by most of us, as we don't yet have the ability to really appreciate what Shabd is. Shabd is a power that is the emanation of the Lord himself, by means of which he created all that is, and by which he sustains it. Were he to withdraw the Shabd, everything would cease to exist.

However, in order to truly *know* Shabd, we first have to go where it can be experienced, and the mystics tell us that although it is everywhere and within everyone, we cannot fully experience its power until we achieve a certain level of concentration at the eye centre. Only when we rise above the eye centre do we meet the Radiant Form of our Master, and experience the pulling power of the Shabd. It is then that we begin to

develop true knowledge of this divine Word of God. Again, not that many of us will have progressed to this stage. Therefore, we remain strangers to this essential aspect of spirituality.

Third, there is the Master. We may claim to know the Master, since we have met him ‘in the flesh,’ having perhaps been to Dera or seen him when he visits the sangat around the world. But the saints tell us that the physical master is not the true Master. We need to go within to encounter the true Master in his Shabd form before we can claim that we know him. The outer Master has a body of flesh and blood just like the rest of us, and he too will age and one day pass from this world. How can that be the true Master? So again, not many of us can claim to know the real Master – the inner Master.

Fourth, there is the soul. But what do we know about the soul? The mystics say that our true identity is the soul. Immortal, beyond birth and death, our soul is said to be a particle of the Lord himself. However, when we refer to the soul, do we *actually know* what we’re talking about? With very few exceptions, our knowledge is confined to our physical body and its associated mind. How then can we experience the soul, when our entire awareness is focused in the physical domain?

So when answering the question “What do we truly know?” We have to admit that, with a few exceptions, we know absolutely nothing concerning these central elements of the spiritual path. We exist, in fact, in a state of ignorance.

Our second question – “How much control do we have over our lives?” – is a bit more tricky, as the subject borders closely on the issue of free will, about which we have many discussions. The mystics tell us that when we take birth, we bring a destiny with us that determines the major events in our life, and when this destiny is completed, this life comes to an end.

We may ask, did we choose our parents, the country we were born in or if we selected our DNA, which determines so much of our potential, skills and abilities? The obvious answer is, “No, we did not!” So how much of our destiny was actually in our hands?

When opportunities came our way and we took advantage of them, and our lives took a different direction from what we had expected – can we take credit for that? Did we really have much choice in the partners

we chose, the friends and enemies we made? And all those times we got sick, did we choose to catch a cold, get the flu or any of the other medical miseries that may have come our way during our lives? Not likely!

It turns out that every aspect of our life has been determined by karma, and that we have had very little power to direct it. Only that which was destined for us has come our way. All our dreams and fantasies are like a morning mist that dissipates in the warmth of the sun.

Therefore, when contemplating the issues of our knowledge and power, we come to the inescapable conclusion that we are both ignorant and helpless. And so, it appears that we are faced with an extremely bleak future in which we seem to be in a rudderless ship, helplessly tossed about by waves of karma on the ocean of life.

Happily, Soami Ji has a solution to our predicament, and he asks us a very pertinent question: “Why not submit to the Master?”

The Master has true knowledge and power, so what more logical course of action could there be? The problem is that our ego does not take kindly to the idea of submission – of deferring one’s own judgment and decisions in favour of those of another. However, when we realize our own helplessness and ignorance, and it becomes obvious that we are not able to help ourselves, then surely the wisest decision is to submit to one who has the means to guide us out of this bondage – one who can rescue us from the clutches of attachment and desires?

Soami Ji continues:

*You have spent this human life in delusion.
Your spouse, your children,
indeed, your entire family are cheats,
so why waste time and energy on them?*

We spend much of our lives in service to our families, friends and others, but to what purpose? We invest so much of ourselves in these relationships that we do not serve our own best interests, which is why Soami Ji refers to them as “cheats.” He is drawing our attention to the fact that they cheat us of our time and the effort necessary to attend to our spiritual needs.

And it is precisely these attachments that bind us to this material creation. How many mothers, fathers, sons, and daughters have we had? We need to keep this in perspective. They are going through their individual karmas and so are we. These relationships are based on karmic debts. When the debt is paid, the relationship comes to an end. In that context all these interactions we go through have no relevance at all.

Nor is relying on our own resources and trying to find our own way out of the maze of coming and going to bring the liberation we want. Once more our only recourse is to seek out one who knows – one who has himself attained the goal and is prepared to help us achieve the same end.

Such a one is a spiritually realized Master, who actually knows the true path and has followed it to its conclusion, meaning that he knows God, the Shabd and the soul. Finding ourselves helpless and ignorant – where else could we turn? He is the only one who can help us to escape our dilemma and lead us on the pathway to ultimate reality. Soami Ji advises us: “Attach yourself to Nam, dear friend.”

Again we realize that unaided we can never gain the perspective of truth and reality that the mystics have, and that if we want to achieve any lasting benefit from this life, we will find it only by following the instructions of a true, living Master.



Just Do It!

A principal theme of Baba Ji's answers in his question—and answer—sessions has been: meditate simply because it's his will. Just do it – because our Master has asked us to, and we need to live in his will.

When we sit for meditation, he said, we shouldn't expect any progress or any results; we shouldn't even ask for it, or for anything else: not for sound or light, nor forgiveness for our karmas, nor even for him. We should just do it, because it's his will.

And along with this, Baba Ji tells us, we should stop analyzing. And yet we do it all the time. We keep asking questions. We want to understand everything. However, the truth is that when it comes to Sant Mat, we can understand almost nothing.

It doesn't occur to us that our habit of analyzing is damaging. We imagine that we're being clever when we analyze everything. But as disciples who want union with him, we need to understand that analyzing immediately activates the mind. Whereas, all we should be doing is trying to quiet the mind and live in his will, because we love him and want to please him.

Baba Ji assures us that when we learn to stay in the Master's will, it then becomes *his* responsibility to take us to where he wants us to be. Our meditation is nothing more than cleaning the vessel. We can't fill the vessel – it's his responsibility to fill it.

One of the main purposes of our seemingly useless meditation is to change us into better human beings, to transform us. We may feel that we're getting nowhere with our meditation. But if we can see these changes happening, this is a clear sign of at least some progress. Maharaj Charan Singh said:

Through meditation our own attitude changes towards everybody... That is the measurement we can make, by which we feel that we are progressing in meditation.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II

And then, a very important reason why the Masters insist that we meditate is that it helps to chip away at the huge mountains of karma that

we've collected after so many lives. As long as our souls are still weighed down by all those karmas, they will not be able to rise. And the horrible truth is that at almost every minute, we could be collecting more karma. How can we possibly escape from here without the Master's grace and forgiveness – invoked by our meditation?

Maharaj Charan Singh once told us that most of our meditation goes to destroying karmas. That's very largely what he's using our meditation for, not to give us experiences of 'sound and light'. For the Master, destroying karma is far more important than showing us any results.

And let us be grateful that he's allowing us to clear so much through meditation. If it were not for this, imagine how many more lives we would have to endure on this low plane before we could return home. In fact, we would never be able to return home, because in all those many more lives we would simply be creating more karma, which would then have to be paid off in future lives.

But we don't think of that as we sit, struggling in the darkness. We often see this struggle as evidence that our meditation is a failure. But even our feeling of failure is a sign that we expect some kind of reward for meditation. Perhaps it shows that we want our meditation to please us, rather than please him.

The old judge Daryai Lal Kapur once told the story of how he spent his annual leave away from his family so that he could spend his time meditating. And every day his mind went crazy and kept thinking of anything except concentrating at the eye focus. Afterwards he went to the Dera, utterly disgusted with himself and quite upset to think that all this time he could have been with his family, enjoying being at the Dera in the presence of Great Master. But when he complained to Great Master about this, the Master actually congratulated him on his weeks of excellent meditation.

So, what was the point here? The point was that his *struggle was* his meditation. The question of succeeding in that meditation was irrelevant.

It's our effort that our Master wants. Maharaj Charan Singh told us repeatedly that every minute, every second we give to meditation, is to our credit.

But because all the Masters have so consistently asked us to meditate, we start to think that it's up to us to *succeed* at our meditation. The truth is that we can't. It's not within our power. Maharaj Charan Singh made this painfully clear:

If we think that with our effort we'll be able to achieve anything, it is impossible. When we improve the quality of our sincerity, our honesty, then we invoke his grace to come to our help, which is never lacking. If sincerity is there, honesty is there – which bring longing in us and create real devotion in us – all these factors provoke his grace, to help us eliminate all that stands between us and the Father. Just by meditation, by effort, I don't think anybody can ever reach back to him.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II

So actually, we can't meditate to get the results we hope for. Still, our efforts will earn their rewards – when the Master judges that it's the right time to give them to us. In *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II*, someone asks Maharaj Charan Singh if the Master sometimes withholds the results of meditation, and he admits that this may happen.

Sometimes it is not in our interest to have those results, but progress is always there. Every time we attend to meditation, progress is there.... He knows best when to give and how to give and how much to give.

So, let's not get depressed if our meditation seems so utterly ineffective. And let's be thankful that, in time, perhaps only at the time of our death, our Master will give us all the rewards he's been holding back for us. In the third volume of *With the Three Masters*, Maharaj Jagat Singh is quoted as having said something extremely significant and revealing:

If the disciple's veil is still not lifted, it does not mean that he should give up meditation or think that he has not made any progress. It is just that his pralabdh karmas [fate] are getting in the way.

Hazur [Maharaj Sawan Singh Ji] said that no effort is ever wasted. At the time of the disciple's death, when his pralabdh karmas are exhausted, the Saints give him back the spiritual wealth he has earned and his veil is lifted.

So, it really doesn't matter that we're being kept in the darkness for so long. It doesn't mean that our meditation is all in vain. It's clearing and clearing millions of karmas that are blocking our way. Our difficulty is that we just can't see that. But here we need to trust that our Master is doing what's best for us. Let's leave it to him to do his job while we do ours.

Everything depends on his grace. Without it nothing can happen. Do you think we would ever sit for a minute if he weren't pulling us from within, if he weren't making it happen? It's not fun getting out of bed early on cold winter mornings, but we do it anyway – because he is forcing us to do it. He is the one who makes us long for him so that we keep trying and trying – regardless of seeing no light or hearing no sound. It's all his grace.

And what is the proof of that grace? Not sound or light or any kind of results in meditation. It's the pull we feel that makes us get up in the morning, while knowing that this meditation will be the same as all the others. Yet we do it anyway.

There's grace in the heartache we feel when it seems we have failed him yet again. There's grace in the guilt we feel when we haven't done enough meditation or perhaps any meditation at all that day. That's his pull from within. Our poor meditation is making us long for him.

That's what it's all about. He's making us long for him. He's also said that regardless of whether we succeed or not, the Master loves the attempts we make to succeed. He doesn't demand success. He asks only that we try. Just that much effort is important. If we trust in anything, let's trust in meditation.

And that means just doing it. It doesn't have to be “successful” meditation; it just means showing up and doing it. That's all he asks of us.



Going Home

There is a word that in most languages carries with it a feeling of comfort, safety and, very often, love. This word is “home.” Home is where we belong. It’s where our hearts long to be. Soami Ji says it all when he says: “Let us turn homeward, friend – why linger in this alien land?” And that’s where we all are right now, in an alien land, far from home and seemingly with no way to get back.

Imagine that the captain of a luxury liner makes us an offer. He will take us aboard and deliver us safely to our homeland. He is our spiritual Master. All he wants in return is that we do a bit of work that he will ask of us. Our earnings for this job will be a fraction of the huge amount we would owe for such a journey, but he would take our work as settlement of our debt. How foolish would it be not to accept this offer?

For initiates of a true Master, the captain is not an imaginary being, and the debts we owe are not imaginary either. The law of karma has been explained to us; the actions of millions of lives have been faithfully recorded, and we must reap what we have sown. Be it pleasant or unpleasant, it can only be done here, on this material plane.

We have in truth been lost in an alien land for so long that we have almost forgotten that this is not our home. We have come to think that we belong here. Under the sway of the mind we have at times even enjoyed being here and perhaps thought that this a very pleasant place – only to discover that the pleasures do not last and, in fact, do not really satisfy. This alien place offers not only pleasures but bitter disappointments and loss, be it of loved ones, health, or possessions.

Deep within us, the longing for home has always been present, but mainly not acknowledged, because the mind has suppressed it with more and more attachments, desires, and promises of lasting happiness and glory. These promises have never been fulfilled, for while seemingly granting satisfaction and happiness, they have turned out to be transitory, ending in loss or finally death – with the whole futile scenario starting again with another birth, another body, another see-saw ride of pleasure and pain.

We now know that we have had so many, many lives. But having been brought in contact with our Master, we have been told of the wonder of the Shabd, God's essence, creator and sustainer of everything that exists – and the ultimate goal of one day merging with the Radiant Form of the Master, which is really Shabd.

We are trying to get there because we have started to realize that there must be something of greater and of more lasting value than our earthly lives. The deep-seated longing of the soul for home has begun to surface and we no longer feel we belong here. In fact, although for so long we did not realize it and could not really explain this feeling of nostalgia and dissatisfaction we experienced from time to time, it was exactly that – the soul's longing to go home.

In the story of the captain of the luxury liner, he offers to take the exiles home. In our case, the captain is so much more than a captain. In fact, we can't conceive of just how very great he is. In the book *With the Great Master in India*, the author wrote – and this accurately applies to our own captain, the Master who has come to our rescue –

Some of the older and more advanced satsangis here tell this disciple that the secret of the Master's power to draw all men to him can be known only after one has gone inside and has followed him to the higher regions. Then it becomes clear to him. Looking at him as a mere man, one can form no conception of his true greatness. But if you go inside and travel with him to and through those upper regions, then and only then do you see him as he is.... And the higher up you go with him, all the way up to Sach Khand, the greater he is seen to be. He is literally and truly King of kings all the way through those regions of light. But returning to earth again, he never says a word of all of that himself and appears among us simply as a kindly, patient father, going about ministering to his children.

What greater blessing can there be than to be an initiate of such a Master, to have been accepted into his fold!

We have received the immense privilege of initiation, which includes the gift of simran – the five holy names imbued with the power of the Masters. Let us use it as the Master wants us to do. Let us repeat it continuously, at every free moment during the day, while busy with

everyday tasks, or walking somewhere, or waiting for something or someone. Let us attentively repeat it during meditation, and not be concerned with results. We may think we are getting nowhere, but we are assured by the Master that not a second of meditation is ever wasted.

If we honestly put in the effort and keep trying, if we regard this lifetime's pains and pleasures as part of his will and go through them cheerfully and gratefully, his loving kindness and grace will carry us through. Baba Jaimal Singh has told us:

The body is a house of pain and pleasure, and in it both will certainly come to pass.... Years and years of a satsangi's sufferings are paid off within a few days. So do not worry about anything.

Spiritual Letters

We've been told that in truth we can only really live in the will of the Master when we go beyond the realm of mind and maya. But till then we can at least *try* to live in the will of the Father, the Master.

The Masters keep encouraging us. They show us that they understand our weaknesses. They never blame us, they just shower us with love and grace, ever loving, ever forgiving. No matter how far we stray, how badly we may neglect our duty to the Master, he will always welcome us back with open arms.

So, having received initiation from a true Master, what excuse can there be for not working as hard as possible towards the ultimate goal? We may still be taking the very first steps of this journey, but there is simply nothing to compare to the wonder of having a Master. Nothing can replace the love we feel for him in our hearts, a priceless gift that has been bestowed on us, a love that we cherish deep within us, our precious treasure.

We are reminded over and over by the Masters that love is the central core of this path because the path is leading us back to God, who is nothing but love. We are trying to get to the stage where we will be merged into the Master, the Shabd, and thus merged into God. This means that we are trying to become love, which is the beginning and the end, because the Shabd, which is everything, is pure love.



Drawn to the Path

The Master is in our life. His path is our way of life. We don't have to try to find him – he has found us. By coming into our lives, the Master has given us an opportunity to realize the reality of our soul and who we really are. But there's a real possibility that many of us are wasting it owing to our lack of effort, our lack of understanding, and the lack of a sense of urgency.

As we go about our daily business, we are mostly oblivious of him in our life. But it is not by chance that we find ourselves on the path with the Master guiding us.

Maharaj Charan Singh said that it is difficult to analyze why we are associated with the path and that it could be for various reasons. But whatever beneficial karma brought us to him is now irrelevant. What is crucial is that he must become the pivot on which our lives rotate. Our attention and awareness should be tuned to him. In *One Being One* we read:

He is forever waiting for us to turn to Him. Indeed, He is the one who prompts us from within, and makes us turn.

Maharaj Charan Singh elaborates on this:

How has the soul come now to the feet of the Master? Is it by your own efforts or by some other means? Did you start searching for the Master right from your birth? Circumstances led you in such a way that you were drawn toward him. If the seed has been once sown, it is the Master who finds the disciple. The disciple can never find the Master. The Master will automatically find his disciple, wherever he may take birth.

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I

The fact that the Master finds and watches over the disciple is beautifully explained in the following extract. Lahiri Mahasaya was a spiritual Master born in 1828. A story is told about the first time he met his Guru, also known as Baba Ji, in the Himalayas. The Guru's voice rang with celestial love as he said to Lahiri:

For more than three decades I have waited for you to return to me. You slipped away and disappeared into the tumultuous waves of the life beyond death. The magic wand of your karma touched you, and you were gone! Though you lost sight of me, never did I lose sight of you! I pursued you over the luminescent astral sea where the glorious angels sail. Through gloom, storm, upheaval and light I followed you, like a mother bird guarding her young. As you lived out your human term of womb life, and emerged a babe, my eye was ever on you. When you covered your tiny form in the lotus posture under the Nadia sands in your childhood, I was invisibly present. Patiently, month after month, year after year, I have watched over you, waiting for this perfect day. Now you are with me.... My own, do you now understand?

Paramahansa Yogananda, *Autobiography of a Yogi*

It's awesome to think that our Master has also been watching over us, patiently waiting for us – possibly over many lifetimes. Ever present, ever vigilant – and yet we are totally unaware of his presence. Maharaj Charan Singh once asked: “How do you know I am not there when I am not there?” He then mentioned a similar message that Christ gave to his disciples, and explained it saying:

I will always be there. I will always hear you and take care of you.... I am always with my disciples.... Do not think that I am not there.

Light on Saint Matthew

Sadly, as much as we like to think and imagine him with us, in truth, we are mostly unaware of his presence. The reason for this is that our consciousness is not yet adequately developed to be able to be aware of him. To understand and comprehend both the Master and the inner regions we need a totally different level of consciousness from our everyday awareness of the physical world.

We are creating our spiritual future now – but what sort of future are we creating? Given our lack of understanding, we probably don't grasp the importance of the Master's request when he implores us to do our meditation *now*, while in the human body.

All mystics have repeatedly advised us to not simply depend on the Master's grace to carry us through and beyond death. In *Shams-e Tabrizi*, the author writes that Shams is emphatic about the uselessness of waiting lazily for God's grace to alter the course of events. Rather, he says, we should make the effort to follow the Master's instructions and actively seek God. He echoes what so many mystics have said: "Effort attracts grace and moves us towards God." Our effort indicates to the Master that we are serious about following the path – and that invokes his grace.

Remorse is a devastating emotion. Will we regret our lack of dedicated effort when we are facing death? We may suffer deep anguish and rue the fact that we did not put more effort into our meditation while we had the opportunity. We all have incidents in our lives where we have done the inappropriate thing, and the result has caused us agonizing remorse.

How many times have we wished we could move back in time and do or say something differently? But we cannot undo what has been done. If our speech or actions can invoke such overwhelming remorse, imagine the regret we will feel when, facing death, we find our spiritual efforts to have been totally inadequate.

Let us not waste another precious life, another precious moment. We must make best use of what we've been given, right here and right now.



The Soul Unmasked

Living in this world is no “walk in the park” as the saying goes. In fact, if we were to conduct an informal survey on what people think of the world as a place to live in, we might be surprised at how few positive responses we would receive.

Much of this is due to the changing values in our societies, as the moral fabric that sustains them slowly decays. We are constantly bombarded with change, which often leads to the unacceptable becoming acceptable. Kindness and compassion appear to be diminishing as many people become overly egotistical. It is also disturbing to note how the important value of respect has deteriorated in many societies. This has taken place in all aspects of life, including respect for one another, and even respect for ourselves.

In the late nineteenth century, Soami Ji wrote about the condition of the world he knew:

*Heavy, intense darkness prevails in the world,
and the body is a storehouse of shadows.
Whether they are awake or asleep, I see people
helplessly caught in the maze of the creation.*

Sar Bachan Poetry

Although he described the state of the world at that time, it equally applies today. It is obvious that humanity does not learn. We are still caught in the clutches of the creation, trapped by our endless desires. The soul, helpless against the influences of the world, is totally ignorant of its true value and its real home. The Master has come to this dark world to escort our soul back to our Father – in our original home.

Soami Ji describes the plight of the soul:

*Through ignorance of its own real home,
the soul is living here like a homeless wanderer,
stumbling through different life forms,
tossed about in the cycle of birth and death.
Moment by moment she lives her days in utter misery,
defeated, demoralized and crying in pain,
but who is there to listen to her cries?*

Here, Soami Ji confronts us with a tragic truth. He makes it clear that we are the souls he is talking about, the souls that are living in misery.

The world is happening according to the Lord's plan, and there is nothing we can do to change it. However, we can definitely avoid some of the impact the world has on us if we focus our attention on the discovery of our own true identity – our soul. The Master's role is to make us aware of the influence the world has on us by guiding us away from the world to the inner realization of our true essence. His teachings motivate us to seek this realization.

Having accepted initiation, we are morally obliged to move from the false view of who we are to the spiritually accurate view of our true reality as spiritual beings. Only he can lead us to this understanding. By holding on to his hand and following his teachings, we will come to understand our true reality, which till now has been clouded by the confusion which surrounds us. But until the Master's teachings become real for us, we will continue to believe that we are separate, individual beings.

As we read in *From Self to Shabd*:

The misconception that we exist as a separate individual is a big hurdle on the path of spirituality. Soami Ji Maharaj says, "Man does not know who he is, whose essence he is, nor where He (the Source) is." Not knowing that in reality we are the formless, deathless Shabd, we remain stuck in the identity we have created as we go through our human experience.

The Masters promise us that the process of discovery of the true value of the self will be most gratifying. This is substantiated by the author of *The Path of the Masters* when he writes:

When a man gets but a glimpse of what he really is now, and especially of what he may yet become by a little effort, that knowledge will give him the greatest possible inspiration.

But what is the true nature of the soul? The Masters tell us that the soul is Shabd. In fact, Shabd is the essence of every being, every creature – of everything that constitutes the world we live in. But what does this mean? Many mystics, ancient philosophers and even some quantum physicists

agree that the essence of the creative energy in the universe – the Shabd – is love. Therefore, the soul is love.

True living mystics are the embodiment of love. Studying how the Masters conduct themselves gives us some idea of what we have to do to clean up our act. By using the Master as a role model, we can examine our own conduct and evaluate how we handle ourselves. This should give us some insight into our spiritual status.

Closely observing ourselves and our behaviour will assist us in realizing how much of a hindrance our inflated ego is. After all, the real purpose of the ego was to enable us to survive in this material existence. But it has subsequently become a major barrier to realizing the true nature of our own selves. Simply put, how can we love the Master when we are so besotted with ourselves? The spiritual love for the Master that we seek cannot grow while we are slaves to our own physical existence. We need to remove the ‘I’ in this love affair.

Baba Ji suggests that we regularly ask ourselves why are we on the path; why we meditate; and where our spiritual practice is taking us? In other words, we need to understand the importance of our spiritual objective and keep it in mind at all times. We can’t afford to ignore this advice. It is easy to become sidetracked and lose focus on the goal. We must not allow anything to detract from our purpose, particularly if we keep in mind the divine grandeur that awaits us within.

The meditation technique we have been given is not difficult to practise – what is difficult, however, is staying with the practice every day. This is why it is so important to keep our destination in mind. We cannot afford to let our spiritual intent slip from our focus.

By prioritizing our simran and bhajan, our spiritual practice will become a natural part of us. As the Greek philosopher Aristotle pointed out:

We are what we repeatedly do.

Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit.

Making the habit of focusing on our objective is exactly what our Master requires of us, and what better experience can we have than that of pleasing him? With this approach, the divine love we yearn for will present itself, and we will realize our true identity. We can’t go wrong if we focus on pleasing our Master.



BOOK REVIEW

Practice and Power of Devotion: Bhakti in Early Hindu Scripture

BY K SANKARANARAYANAN

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Practice and Power of Devotion explores the bhakti practice as it is explained in Hindu scriptures, especially the Vedas and the Upanishads. Bhakti is a spontaneous love for God, and is at the very foundation of all spiritual disciplines.

The first part of the book, titled “Background,” begins with an essential question for all spiritual aspirants: “Who or What is God?” When we seek to devote ourselves to God, we have to understand who or what we are devoting ourselves to. Various philosophical systems have been formed around the attempt by sages and saints to describe God, but only a finite object can be defined. Mystics attempt to give some description of God, but they can only provide hints and suggestions. Through the practice of devotion, spiritual seekers begin to grasp the full truth of Absolute Reality. The Rig Veda advises:

*Let us meditate upon the effulgent light of that One
Who is worthy of worship
And who has created all the worlds!
May he inspire our intellect
(to realize the Truth)!*

The author explains the concepts of Nirguna Brahman and Saguna Brahman. When the Supreme Being is understood as Absolute Reality, the universal energy, the infinite, the One beyond any concepts or attributes possible for humans to imagine, this is called Nirguna Brahman. However, humans crave a personal God, a God with qualities and attributes that we can relate to. This is Saguna Brahman. Saguna Brahman is the highest manifestation of God that can be grasped by the human mind, being limited by many forms and names. In the Upanishads, God is said to be both infinite and personal, both Nirguna and Saguna. The author explains that

the Nirguna and Saguna forms of God both represent the same divinity but conceptualized differently.

Next, the author discusses the soul and its relation to the Lord, explaining the Hindu concepts of *atman* (soul) and *paramatman* (supreme soul). The author writes, “The soul is the prime mover in a living being, like fuel in a vehicle.... Its radiance illuminates the psycho-physical systems and endows the mind, organs, and body with a semblance of consciousness.” Quoting the *Bhagavad-gita*:

*As the sun illumines this whole universe,
so does the soul illumine the entire body.*

The soul’s purpose, says the author, is liberation. The individual soul, *atman*, is eternal and illumined pure consciousness. However, it is caged in a physical body, chained by the trappings of karma, mind, and senses. Once all these chains are shattered and the soul realizes its own true nature, there is no separation between the soul and the Lord, between *atman* and *paramatman*. This is beautifully illustrated in the following quote from the Upanishads:

When the deceased reaches the door of the Lord of living beings, the question is asked, “Who are you?” If he answers by a personal or a family name, he is subject to the law of karma. If he responds, “Who I am (is) the light you are; as such have I come to you, the heavenly light,” the Lord replies: “Who you are, that same am I; who I am that same are you. Come in.”

The second part of the book, titled “The Doctrine of Bhakti,” explains that the root of the term bhakti is bhaj, which means to worship, to adore, or to serve. It is described as intense love, and it implies total submission to God in body, mind, and word. Narada, a great ascetic who is credited as having written many hymns in the Rig Veda and Atharva Veda, says that bhakti “consists of the consecration of all of one’s activities to the Supreme Lord, by complete surrender to him and the feeling of extreme anguish if he is not remembered.... Divine love, in its intrinsic nature, is nothing less than the immortal bliss itself.” As the Shrimad Bhagavatam says:

When all the energies of the mind, including those of the organs of knowledge and of action, become concentrated as a unified mental mode directed to the Supreme Being, spontaneous like an instinct and devoid of

any extraneous motives, the resulting state of mind is called bhakti.... Like fire it burns up the soul's sheath of ignorance.

Sage Shandilya says that bhakti “is the most perfect attachment to God.” At its most basic level, writes the author, bhakti is “the intense and unconditional love between the individual soul and the supreme soul.... This love is eternal.”

The third part of the book, titled “The Practice and Power of Devotion,” begins with the statement: “Human beings are endowed with different temperaments, tastes, and tendencies. Their education, social, and geographic backgrounds, cultural levels, capacity for comprehension, and their needs vary.” Therefore, Hinduism delineates different ways of expressing one’s devotion: Karma Yoga, Jnāna Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Rāja Yoga, and Nāda Yoga. The author says that although these types of discipline and forms of worship differ, bhakti is essential for all. He goes on to devote two chapters to “Preparations for Divine Love.” These preparations include finding a teacher, living a clean, moral way of life, adopting a vegetarian diet, and cultivating the qualities of a good human being.

Although the true meaning of *bhakti* is love and devotion for the Supreme Being, it can also mean being devoted to a manifested form, as in *guru bhakti*. The author notes, “The tradition of the living guru is the foundation of Hinduism’s spiritual culture. The term *guru bhakti* connotes doing spiritual practices and conducting oneself according to the commands of the *guru*. Its pinnacle is unconditional surrender to the *guru*.” As the Guru Gita says:

*The letter “gu” denotes darkness,
The letter “ru” denotes the remover of darkness.*

So, the meaning of “guru” is “the one who dispels the darkness of the disciple’s ignorance.”

The term *guru* in India can mean anyone who teaches, including a schoolteacher, a marketing guru, or a dance guru. In the spiritual tradition, a guru is a teacher who helps the disciple reach his spiritual potential and understand the deep mysteries of spirituality. Devotion to the guru, then, does not mean worshipping or bowing down before the guru. True *guru bhakti* manifests in sincerely following the guru’s instructions. The author explains:

The role of the guru is that of a guide and mentor to help the disciple attain God-realization. He endeavours to make the disciple completely independent, so that the disciple may not need to lean on him forever. While the guru's role is to whet the disciple's appetite to search for the truth, the ultimate search and discovery depend on the disciple's own actions. The guru gives his disciple the key to the spiritual treasure, and it is for the disciple to use it and attain beatitude. A hungry man will have to eat food himself to satisfy his hunger.

The enlightened guru can lead the spiritual seeker to true reality, out of darkness into the light of spiritual understanding. Devotion to the guru is essential to help the disciple move beyond an intellectual and conceptual understanding of the scriptures. As the Rig Veda says:

*Someone ignorant of the path
asks of one who knows it.
He travels onward
as instructed by the skilful guide.
He finds the path that leads directly forward.
This, indeed, is the blessing of instruction.*

