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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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The Gift of Bhakti

*Listen, my friend, while I tell you
about the greatness of bhakti
as explained by the Saints.*

*Know that this is the very path of the Masters ...
Without bhakti all are hollow, without substance,
like a husk without the seed.*

*Hold fast to bhakti, O ignorant one,
and give up all your 'wise' pursuits.*

*Call it devotion, adoration or love;
the three differ in name, not in form or essence.*

*Understand that Gurmat means bhakti and love,
and that every other path is a contrivance of the mind.*

*Love is the essence of God and soul,
and true Nam is the real form of bhakti.*

*Bhakti and the Lord are one and the same,
and the true Master is the real form of love.*

*In fact, your own real form is also love,
so you may accept all beings to be of the same essence.*

*But you might discern one difference:
while some are drops, others are waves of that love.*

*In some it appears as a sea of light
while in others it is called the fountainhead of all love.*

*Desire defeats one person
while maya dominates another.*

*But there comes a stage where maya is diminished,
dissolved in the Ocean and purified by its grace.*

*At the Source there is no maya at all,
only love prevails there – nothing but love.*

*It is the great treasure house of love,
it has no beginning, no end.*

*No one except a Saint has access there –
only a true Master makes it his home.*

*Such is the value of love and devotion,
you should secure this wellspring of nectar.
First offer your devotion to the Master,
then receive from him the mark of Nam.
Go on singing his praises, please the Guru
and obtain from him the treasure of love.
Listen to what Radha Soami says –
you have received the gift of bhakti.*

Bachan 12, Shabd 1
Sar Bachan Poetry



The Expanding Cycle of Spiritual Love

The following is an abridged excerpt from a newly published RSSB book on the theme of seva.

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

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

Maharaj Sawan Singh, *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. I

The continuum of love is not a straight line, however – a stage of obedient effort, followed by a stage of surrender, then longing, and finally union. Rather, it is circular. Consistent daily acts of obedience chip away at our ego and encourage the mind to surrender. As surrender grows, it fuels the desire to obey the master more and more – which in turn further increases surrender. Thus, obedience and surrender feed each other in an expanding cycle; and with this the longing for union slowly grows. A lifetime of obedience and outer surrender eventually leads to inner surrender, true longing, and ultimately to union. *This* is the continuum – an ever-expanding spiral of spiritual love.

As love for the master grows, we may feel a natural urge to express it outwardly, because this is how we've been conditioned by the world. But spiritual love is different from worldly love – as it grows, it moves deeper within. Hazur advises: "A lover never advertises that love."

Well, if there's love, there is nothing to speak about, and if you speak, there is no love. Love loses its depth when you try to express it. The more you digest it, the more it grows. It is more to experience than to express.

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

The master doesn't need to be shown how much we love him; he knows.... The master sees our love, and yet somehow we find this hard to believe. So we may feel the urge to demonstrate our love through some visible means, at the very least through tears. And if there are no tears – if we don't feel

overwhelmed with emotion – we may judge ourselves and conclude we have no love. But how can there be no love?

When we feel we have no love, it means we are not satisfied with the depth of the love we have. That doesn't mean that you have no love at all. Otherwise you wouldn't think about it.

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

There may be times when we look at a fellow sevadar's love for the master, compare ourselves, and find our own love wanting. But Huzur reminds us never to compare ourselves with anyone else:

So many of you tell me in interviews that you don't have love. I don't understand your concept of love and how you analyze and measure it. There is nothing to think about love. Love is just there. Our problem is that we compare ourselves with each other. We think that person is more in love than I am and I should be like him. But nobody knows anybody at all.

At times we may look at the master's love for us and make judgements – he loves this sevadar more than me; he loved me before but he doesn't love me as much now, and so on. But the master's love for us is steady and unchanging – it is infinite. Rather than overwhelm us with that boundless ocean, the master simply provides a mirror – he reflects our own love back to us:

You see your own reflection in the master. If you have love and devotion, you will feel he's in love with you – he loves you. If you are indifferent to him, you'll feel your master is indifferent to you. This is our own reflection.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Legacy of Love*

Our understanding of love is limited, so we tend to calculate, analyze, and worry. If, instead, we would simply make the necessary sacrifices to obey the master and give him our time and attention, love for him will automatically bloom within us. It will reflect in our words, our deeds, our character, and our very way of life. This is the highest form of service. This is guru bhakti, devotion to the master. This is love.



Why I'm a Vegetarian

The following article presents the personal perspective of the writer. We may not necessarily share the views put forward, but there is material here to make us think.

According to my mother, whenever she tried feeding me any meat, I would spit it straight back out. Anxious about my growth, she persevered for a bit but I'd react so violently that, eventually, she gave up. She needn't have worried because, contrary to popular belief, being vegetarian didn't harm my development. In fact, six decades later, I'm certain that the reason I'm fitter, healthier, and look younger than my peers is purely down the lacto-vegetarian diet upon which I've lived my entire life. Nor is this difference peculiar to me and my non-vegetarian group of friends. The overriding conclusion of fifty years of scientific evidence is – as Anita Bean, the award-winning nutritionist bodybuilding champion explains to elite athletes – “diets centred around plants have clear health advantages over those based on animal foods.”¹ I hope to explore these advantages in a future article, but the primary purpose of this article is to explain why I, a lifelong lacto-vegetarian, view the rise in ‘plant-based food’ diets – the fashionable term for the vegetarian or vegan diet – with some reservations.

From fringe to fashion: plant-based eating turns mainstream

To avoid any risk of misunderstanding, by ‘lacto-vegetarian,’ I mean the exclusion of all meat and poultry as well as fish and eggs. As the only lacto-vegetarian in most social gatherings, it's been usual for me to be the odd one out. Fortunately, aside from arousing mild curiosity, I've not been subject to incidents of teasing or ridicule that other vegetarians recount from time to time. On the contrary, in my experience, when new acquaintances learn I'm vegetarian, they either inform me about their ‘just occasional’ meat consumption or give some reason or other to explain why they're eating meat out of necessity and, really, it's not because they *want* to. What I find intriguing is why they feel compelled to downplay their meat consumption. Could it be that, for one split

second, my being vegetarian is making them uneasy about *their* dietary choices? As for my family and friends who aren't vegetarian, I've never tried to bring them around to my way of thinking and they've shown me the same courtesy – in fact, more so. Whereas I could never allow meat into my home, let alone buy it, they shop in food outlets and experiment with recipes they wouldn't otherwise consider were it not to accommodate my lacto-vegetarian diet.

My personal experience has been at odds with the mainstream view of vegetarianism in many Western countries – at least until recently. Once caricatured as the dietary choice of long-haired, unkempt hippies or tree-hugging environmental warriors, plant-based eating is, as they say, having a moment. Although exact figures are unavailable, globally over the last five years, the number of people no longer choosing to eat meat or meat by-products has increased dramatically. Right now, for instance, it's estimated that around fourteen percent of the world's population is either vegan or vegetarian.²

Although I could rattle off all sorts of data evidencing the ubiquity of plant-based eating, the level of choice and sheer ease with which one can adopt such a diet nowadays is perhaps the strongest.³ At one time, other than fresh fruit and vegetables, vegetarian fare in the western hemisphere was confined to health food shops, which in turn could only be found in major towns and cities. But enter any supermarket today, entire aisles are stocked with an array of vegan and vegetarian food innovations. Also gone are the days when, upon booking a restaurant, it was customary to check the availability of a vegetarian option. By contrast, from nationwide mass-market chains to high-end, fine dining establishments, today's restaurateurs are either incorporating more plant-based options into their main menu or introducing a second menu, one designed specifically for their vegan and vegetarian clientele. Set alongside the surge in vegan or 'pure vegetarian' restaurant openings, picking where and what to eat has, literally, become an activity in itself!

Global meat consumption and production reach record levels

Because of all the attention directed at plant-based eating, perhaps like me you thought that meat consumption was declining. However, as

documented by numerous studies and official statistics, global meat consumption is in fact *increasing*. Take, for instance, findings from researchers at Oxford University (UK) who recently reported that global meat consumption was nearly five times higher in 2017 than it was in the early 1960s,⁴ or those of a separate group of scientists who calculated that, worldwide, each person ate, on average, 4.5 kilograms more meat per year in 2019 than in 2000.⁵ These results are consistent with numerous other studies on meat consumption trends, including those undertaken by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations. In fact, it was in response to one of its reports that the highly reputable *MIT Technology Review* ran the following (rather alarming) headline in 2021: “We’re on track to set a new record for global meat consumption.”⁶

With humanity setting a new global record in how much meat it consumes, this inevitably points to an increase in demand. And if demand has increased, then there must have been a reciprocal increase in supply. Unfortunately, this reasoning is indeed validated by the FAO which, showing meat production reached a global high of just under 340 million tonnes in 2020, reports that this level is “forty-five percent higher compared with 2000.”⁷ In two decades, therefore, we have virtually doubled the number of animals and marine creatures being killed for food. To put the 340 million tonne figure in perspective, this equates to slaughtering up to 6.3 billion⁸ fish, land, and marine animals *every single day*. And to put the 6.3 billion statistic in perspective, imagine if, except for the people living in India and the United States, the entire population of the world was killed, *daily*!

Why I’m disturbed by the global popularity of plant-based food

Given humanity’s exploitation of the animal kingdom, why then am I disturbed by the surge in people turning to plant-based food? Isn’t this a good thing, I hear you ask? Of course, as a lifelong vegetarian, I’ll always be pleased when somebody forgoes a meat option in favour of a vegetarian one. What concerns me, however, is *motive*.

People give up meat for numerous reasons, but the three most commonly reported include concern about the environmental impact of meat production, opposition to industrial farming and agriculture, or to realize any of the numerous health benefits associated with a herbivorous diet.⁹ I'm not suggesting these reasons are illegitimate, and I don't want to be 'holier than thou,' but the benefits associated with each one of them would be realized automatically if our choices were driven by morality. In fact, it's the absence of morality in much of the current discourse surrounding the popularity of plant-based eating that I find troubling. Why? Because when morality isn't the basis of our behaviour, there's a risk that it changes according to the zeitgeist. Today climate change is viewed as the world's most urgent problem, but what if this was to be resolved without making any changes to existing farming methods or if some other problem became even more urgent? Imagine if an illness we're suffering from could be treated only with animal-based medicine, what then? Are we saying that in these scenarios, it would be okay – paraphrasing Ovid, the first-century BCE Roman poet – to cram our bodies with the death of another living creature?¹⁰

Morality – overlooked but, *really*, the *only* reason to become herbivorous

Non-judgmentalism – the idea that none of us has the right to mandate how others should live their lives – is a prominent feature of contemporary society. Although this suggests a new era of tolerance, in *Being Cultured*, the academic Angus Kennedy explains why this results in “moral schizophrenia and irrationalism” whereby we outwardly conform to society's permissive, non-moral codes through simple “inertia”¹¹ (we don't want to be different). As Susan Neiman explains in *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-Up Idealists*, what this means is that the estrangement between morality and mainstream society has become so great that moral judgments are increasingly rare. The philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre goes even further, arguing that, governed by emotion, modern-day societies cast doubt over the very existence of virtue at all. So, perhaps it's

because we're living in a "post-virtue" society (to use MacIntyre's phrase) that morality features so little in the rationales underpinning the contemporary shift to plant-based diets. But like the author of *This Is Vegan Propaganda*, I believe that the only issue determining our choice about eating animal products should be whether it is right or wrong to do so. The nineteenth-century Indian saint Tulsi Sahib identified "compassion, humility, and benevolence" to be the "gems"¹² of this world. I look upon these as the core attributes of what it means to be human and, by extension, humane. If we apply these terms to how we treat animals, we need to ask ourselves whether it is:

"Benevolent" to mutilate piglets or to separate newborn babies from their mothers? Is it "kind" to selectively breed chickens so that they cannot stand and their organs fail?... Is it "compassionate" to exploit and ultimately take the life of an animal who does not need or want to die?

Ed Winters, *This Is Vegan Propaganda (And Other Lies the Meat Industry Tells You)*

I leave it to each reader to decide the answers to the questions Ed Winters poses. Should anyone think that just because modern-day industrial farming methods are legal and promoted as "humane", I'd argue that, as consumers, we have a moral obligation to find out the validity of claims made by the animal farming industries about how they breed, rear and kill sentient creatures. So, I'm not going to describe the shocking cruelty, suffering, and pain that occurs with industrialized animal and fishing farming practices. You can find out for yourself. I will, however, include a quote from a group we don't often hear from, those working in the livestock farming industry. As one ex-slaughterhouse worker put it:

Think about this, as you're tucking into a roast: you didn't hear the tortured screams of those animals. You didn't see them fight with every ounce of their strength to stay alive. You didn't clean their blood from the factory floor. I did, and the guilt will haunt me forever.¹³

Conclusion

My teenage self would have enjoyed explaining to non-vegetarians why they were wrong for eating meat and why the lacto-vegetarian diet she'd adopted was the *right* one. However, Hazur Maharaj Charan

Singh's wisdom and counsel influenced me not to be evangelical but to adopt a 'live and let live' approach to life. Still, I can't help reflecting upon the extraordinary scale on which we humans are killing animals, especially within the context of the upcoming holidays. With food constituting an integral component of the festivities, wondering what'll be dished up as families across the globe celebrate Thanksgiving, Diwali, and Christmas brings to mind the following passage from *This Is Vegan Propaganda*:

Every time we eat, we have the power to radically transform the world we live in. Our choices can help alleviate the most pressing issues we face today: the climate crisis, infectious and chronic diseases, human exploitation and, of course, non-human exploitation. Undeniably, these issues can be uncomfortable to learn about but the benefits of doing so cannot be overstated. It is quite literally a matter of life and death.

As I said, I've never tried to convert anyone to vegetarianism and I'm not about to try now, primarily because it's Sant Mat's emphasis on tolerance and acceptance rather than passing judgement over others that, above all else, initially attracted me to the path. The present Master, for example, constantly reminds us to respect the views of others even when they are diametrically opposed to our own. We may not judge, or make judgments for, others. However, this doesn't mean that we shouldn't take responsibility for our own behaviour and apply a rigorous moral yardstick to what we do and why. Nor does it stop me from sympathizing with the goal of *101 Reasons Why I'm Vegetarian*:

We humans may have an innate desire to eat meat, but our physical make-up also includes a very large brain, which has been used to overcome countless barriers that were also considered insurmountable. To hope that humanity will choose to transcend its nature and adopt vegetarianism is indeed to aim high. Still, our brain has allowed us to achieve some pretty amazing things.... In the end, we can choose to undermine our bodies' exquisite mechanisms that keep us healthy. We can continue to foster a grievous alienation from the natural world with efficient but cruel systems of livestock production. We can perish by our own hands on a planet

ruined by the environmental ravages of our carnivorous desires. Or we can embrace life by creating a vegetarian world.

The author's vision for a "vegetarian world" may seem a romantic notion to some, but I'll continue doing all I can to help realize this idea. What about you?

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Gratitude

*Thank you for the world so sweet
Thank you for the food we eat
Thank you for the birds that sing
Thank you God for everything*

This childhood prayer has been taught to countless children as grace before or after meals. A sense of gratitude, a thankful heart, is something that we like to see in children. And perhaps, as we serve out the meal, we feel a pleasant glow that we are the instruments through which God has provided and that the children are grateful for what is given.

It is sad if, amongst our adult concerns, we lose this sense of grateful connection with our Creator. In *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. III, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

You see, the Lord has given us so much in life, but we don't have that thankful heart. Instead of asking the Father to give us the boons in life, we should ask him to give us that heart which is full of gratitude for what he has given to us. We need that understanding to thank him for what he has given, but we are always protesting what he has not given.

With his all-encompassing vision, the Master sees just how blessed we are; he knows the entirety of God's grace and generosity – but equally, how limited our vision can be. Our vision can be so obscured by our narrow focus on ourselves that we fail to appreciate our own grand heritage.

Counting our blessings and feeling grateful is an exercise that can lead to greater well-being and happiness in our worldly life. When we recognize the good things that have come our way (count our blessings), feelings of contentment arise instinctively and naturally. Furthermore, when we remember not just the things in themselves but the one who has given them, a warm connection is established between that person and us.

Robert Emmons, an eminent academic, has written several papers on the psychology of gratitude, showing that being more grateful can lead to increased levels of well-being. For example, in 2003, Emmons and McCullough published a study showing that college students who

expressed gratitude were more likely to feel optimistic, exercise regularly, and were less likely to report ailments. Similarly, the authors of an article entitled “Giving thanks can make you happier” cited a psychological experiment where the study participants, having written a letter to someone they wished to thank, were asked to deliver it to the recipient. Participants’ happiness and life satisfaction levels increased dramatically after completing this task.

What is it that we can be grateful for? Is it health, family, friends, a kindness shown, or a source of income that provides the necessities of life? And if any of these becomes flawed, or is taken away, are we glad for the help we received to get through? Are we grateful that there was a doctor to tend our wounds? Grateful that a friend stood by us when tragedy struck? Grateful that we at least had a bed at the end of a bad day? When the sun shines, do we rejoice in nature? Are we grateful for the air we breathe or the rain that waters the earth?

Although the origins of the following proverb remain disputed, its most probable author is the seventeenth-century Persian poet Sādi: “I cried because I had no shoes but then I saw a man with no feet.”

The proverb urges us to be happy and grateful for what we *do* have rather than focusing on that which we don’t. Almost always, someone is worse off than we are.

The results of gratitude are numerous. If we acknowledge and feel grateful for the kindness of others, we are more likely to pass the good turn on and be kind ourselves. If we enjoy and are thankful for the beauties of nature, we will look after the natural world and avoid abusing the environment. Gratitude is not just a feeling; it increases goodness in the world. Mentally, our thoughts become focused on the positive and away from the negative.

Let’s take it further: this turning away from negativity and self-obsession is precisely what we try to do spiritually. Of course, the essential tools for this are the simran, dhyan and bhajan as taught by the Master, but positive thinking also helps. Behind the kind hands that help us along our way in the world is the one Creator, our loving Father. Maharaj Sawan Singh wrote in *The Dawn of Light*:

Whatever good or bad happens to you, through whatever person or object, directly proceeds from our loving Father. All persons and objects are but tools in his hand.

This is an extraordinary statement, and if we make an effort to understand it and take it to heart, it cannot do other than bring us to a state of awe, acceptance, and gratitude. Just as cultivating a sense of gratitude to benefactors in the world creates a happy connection with them, cultivating a sense of gratitude to God, our benefactor, affirms one's connection with the divine, as we cannot help but conclude that everything is a gift from him. This, in turn, helps us annihilate the ego. When we acknowledge that everything in our life comes from the divine, it finally dawns on us that we – you and I – are nothing.

It's rather like rolling a snowball in soft snow. The ball may start small, but as it rolls, it grows, and the rolling becomes more and more effective, gathering a great deal of snow. Like this, our gratitude and sense of connection with God grow and become dominant in our life.

How do we best express gratitude? In answer to this, we might ask ourselves the question that every parent asks: what do I want for my child? The answer that most parents give will be, "I just want him or her to be happy!"

If we are grateful to God, we will also be deeply grateful to the one who has come to our level to make him known to us – our Master. We can show gratitude to God by honouring and obeying our Master, by using the gifts we have been given in a responsible way, and – importantly – by enjoying them. If we are happy and happily engaged, we make him happy! There's no better way of saying thank you.



The First Glimmer of Dawn

*It's funny what a little bit of concentration brings;
My Master told me, "Say these Names and banish other things."
And so I sat, and as I think that he is rather groovy,
Examined every precious Name as if it were a ruby.
I must admit that, for a while, inside my head was chaos,
I thought about old movie stars and world cup football play-offs;
Family, work and other things all whizzed around my brain.
At times I thought that sitting there would drive me quite insane.*

*But Master wants me still to sit and focus on this stuff,
And so I keep the discipline, although at times it's tough.
I fight with my alarm clock – I say, "No, that can't be right
To wake me up so early – it's the middle of the night!"
But step by teeny-tiny step I start to tame the mind,
It is a little monkey, though, and really not inclined
To help me in this giant quest to find my Real Home,
So when I sit to meditate, it always starts to moan:*

*"Oh, it's too early! I'm too tired! You deserve a rest!
There's more important things to do, I really must protest!
Today should be a holiday; you know, you don't look well ...
Despite all this you won't give up? Alright, I'll give you hell!"
But habits come and habits go, so as I keep persisting,
My mind is slowly calming down and giving up resisting.*

*And so today at last, you see, I've found the secret corner
Where Shabd can be accessed and, by gosh, my soul feels warmer.
With luck, my mind will even see it's not a waste of time;
That meditation matters and the task is to refine
Our grosser nature bit by bit, and keep inside the focus.
The more that we are balanced – well, the less the world can choke us.*

*But let me now enjoy the peace that radiant Shabd can bring,
And for a while enjoy the road that takes me to my King!*



Are You Master's Devotee?

Are you a 'true devotee' of the Master? Or, after a bit of self-analysis, would you take a sharp intake of breath upon finding yourself matching Kabir's description as "the pretender"?

*Behold, I went out into the world to see
The way it worships the Supreme Lord.
Now I return to say that genuine worship
Is truly rare. Great is the distance
Between devotion and its show –
Great as that between earth and sky.
The Master's devotee is in tune with the Lord
But the pretender is immersed in the world.*

Kabir the Great Mystic

Perhaps we came to Sant Mat because of the simplicity of the teachings and its absence of rituals and ceremonies. Upon initiation, we vowed to follow the practice set out before us. However, as Maharaj Charan Singh once commented, understanding Sant Mat is easy but living the Sant Mat way of life is much harder. So, as the years go by, perhaps we should ask ourselves whether we're really practicing the philosophy or whether we are using the Master's instruction to lead an ordinary life as a cover to remain immersed in the world

Much of modern life is narcissistic, superficial, and just plain tacky. Even if we substitute trashy distractions with wholesome pastimes, these are just as powerful in diverting our attention away from the one upon whom we wish to focus – the Master. Telling ourselves that spirituality is our primary objective is not the same as putting in the hard work necessary to turn this aspiration into reality. We may wish to ask ourselves a further question: "Is my lifestyle conducive or detrimental to meditation? If detrimental, what changes do I need to make to put this right?" This isn't a difficult question, since we instinctively know what we should or shouldn't be doing to create an environment that supports our meditation.

The honesty to ask ourselves whether we are fully immersed in the ocean of Sant Mat or merely dipping our toes at the water's edge is vital for our spiritual development. As Kabir warns us in the following verse, superficial devotion will “never dye you in spiritual hues.” We’ve all experienced that loveless state from time to time, when it seemed nigh on impossible either to feel the presence of, or love for, the Divine.

*Remember, friend, devotion that is imitation –
Mere physical sitting without real love –
Can never dye you in spiritual hues....
If you seek to practise devotion for the Master
Give up all pleasures and desires of the world.
Rare is birth in the human body, says Kabir –
Do not waste it pursuing passing pleasures.*

If someone has no inkling of the spiritual purpose of life, that person cannot be blamed for failing to detach from worldly objects and desires. However, when we are blessed with the guidance of a true Master who patiently and lovingly explains the spiritual teachings over and over again, how foolish we are if we fail to put these into practice. What to do? Well, start meditating!

As recounted in *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh counselled the Great Master to practice meditation in the following way:

First put your attention in the Satguru's form, then start simran, and with intense love and devotion, slowly, gently, direct your inner hearing and seeing faculties ... towards the Sound and fix them in it... Your attention may remain focused for no more than a minute or two... or it may barely hear the Sound, but even then the news of your effort will reach right into Sach Khand, that you are offering a prayer.

How often have the Masters told us that the Lord loves every genuine effort we make to meditate, irrespective of how paltry this seems? The sincerity of our practice is in our control but, reassuringly, the results of our labour are to be left to him.

Baba Ji once said that every time we meditate, something happens. He wasn't specific – he doesn't need to be. If we live life consciously, we know

that extraordinary things happen. Extraordinary grace, extraordinary ‘coincidences’, extraordinary outcomes. How do we know this? Because the Master has lifted the veil of illusion covering the material world just enough to give us a glimpse of the underlying reality.

Without any doubt, we will continue to encounter life’s difficulties after initiation; they are part of the tapestry of life. Our troubles and anxieties divert our attention from meditation just as much as our frivolous pursuits. An extract from one of Maharaj Sawan Singh’s letters to a disciple is reproduced in *In the Footsteps of the Master*:

Do not feel perturbed; after all, adversities do come to human beings. We should face them with patience and steadfastness. All days are not the same. When good days do not last, why expect bad days to persist? Much of our bad times have passed away. Only a little is left; bear it with fortitude. Satguru is within you and is every moment looking after you. Have faith in his grace and compassion and do not feel dejected. Do not let patience desert you. Contemplate on the Satguru’s form and continue to attend to your meditation regularly.

Sometimes life is very smooth and easy, and at other times we feel beset by difficulties and hardships. Sometimes we have to undergo these to be humbled and reach that state in which we are fit to be with him. The saints liken this process to fabricating a fine sword. First, the base iron – the disciple – is heated to an incredibly high temperature in a forge; then it is beaten repeatedly on an anvil, and finally plunged into cold water. Without this process, there is no strong and beautiful blade.

To counteract our difficult times, we can adopt some techniques or ‘tips’ that disciples sometimes use to make themselves more receptive to the Master’s grace or to put them in the right frame of mind. There can be no calculation on a spiritual path – “If I do this, I’ll get that” – but if practised in the right spirit, the following pointers can be helpful:

- Every day, before sitting in meditation, we should remind ourselves that this is the only important thing we will do today. With this attitude, we are better able to fend off the urgent insistence of the mind that we should stop meditating and attend to this or that important

business. Nothing is as important as what we are doing at that moment because meditation is imperishable and, unlike everything else, will stand to our credit beyond death. Everything else is like yesterday's newspapers – events that seem important when they occur but which, after a few days or weeks, will be forgotten or irrelevant.

- We treat meditation as a duty, as an obligation, as a commitment, and at one level, it is all these things. But at another level, it is an act of love. When we meditate because we have no other place to take refuge, our hearts will open, and the Lord will enter. If we meditate even a little before going to bed at night, reminding ourselves that in a few hours, we will have another opportunity to sit in the presence of the Lord, we will notice a difference in our practice. Sister Wendy, a well-known English nun, said that she began each day with the words, “It is for thee, Lord, that I awake.”
- How should we do simran? We can repeat the holy words as though we were swimming with sharks and are protected as long as we keep on repeating them! Alternatively, we can think of simran as the password which gives us access to the site we want to be on. It must be input carefully, consciously and correctly or else the site will not open. Maharaj Jagat Singh used to recommend that we recall each name as if we are handling precious gems.
- We could read a few lines of inspirational poetry by true Masters to inspire and put ourselves in the mood for meditation.

We are focused on the roar of this world – and the Shabd, if audible at all, is only a distant murmur. Just a little change to our priorities will reverse this situation. The ‘sound and fury’ of the world will subside, leaving us to become absorbed in the ocean waves of Shabd.



The Goldsmith's Tale

A goldsmith living near the Dera during the 1960s recounted the following anecdote about his early days as a disciple of Maharaj Sawan Singh. The story first appeared in the Spiritual Link magazine (published by the UK) of that time.

A year after my initiation, I began forging coins. After being caught by the police, I was sentenced to five years of hard labour in one of India's strictest prisons.

While in jail, I hand-milled flour with grindstones as part of my punishment, and it was only then that I remembered my Master. So I prayed to him as hard as I could to release me from jail so I could grind flour at the Dera. To my surprise, I was released five months later, and I immediately walked to Dera to see Maharaj Ji.

At the time, Maharaj Ji was giving satsang, so I waited. When it ended, I went over to him and explained: "Master, I was initiated by you, but after a year, I was jailed for a dishonest act. There, as I ground flour by hand, I prayed to you to release me from jail and, in return, I promised I'd gladly undertake this hard labour at the Dera. Master, now that I am free, please give me the flour-grinding seva."

"My son," replied the Master, "you see that God is remembered more in jail. Dera has electricity now and a mill that grinds most of the flour it needs. But whenever you sit for bhajan for half an hour, increase it to one hour; if you sit for one hour, then increase it to two hours; if you sit for two hours, increase it to four hours. This is the grinding seva you can do for me."



Goldilocks Go Home

Just doing our meditation, punctually sitting for the required time each day, whether we feel like it or not, is very important. Beyond that, it's even better if we can approach meditation with a positive attitude. Feeling disappointed about one's apparent lack of progress is not helpful and spoils this positivity. As Maharaj Charan Singh advises a seeker in *Light on Sant Mat*:

Please do not mind the ups and downs which are almost unavoidable but carry on with faith and confidence. It is not for us to judge the progress. Ours is to do our duty faithfully and leave the rest to the Master. The soldier's duty is to fight and to obey the commands, it is for the generals to plan the strategy and evaluate results. If we but do our duty faithfully and carry out the instructions we received at the time of initiation, we have nothing to worry about. The Master will do the rest.

Please keep on with your bhajan and simran, and try to be regular. Do some simran before retiring to bed and read Sant Mat books when you get time, but never strain yourself.

The Master points out an elementary truth about life: ups and downs are unavoidable. Yet, strangely, the most straightforward insights are often the hardest to accept. Our experience of meditation varies. Sometimes we find it comparatively easy to concentrate, but there are days when our mind is so scattered that it's painful to sit still for even half an hour. Meditation has ups and downs because our life goes through ups and downs. The mind and emotions, driven by karma, create a see-saw effect. This is the nature of the mind – it's constantly reacting. Hazur Maharaj Ji's letter advises us to step back and to “carry on with faith and confidence,” even though our mind is experiencing turbulence.

Hazur Maharaj Ji also counsels us not to judge our inner progress, a maxim which is the opposite of the constant judgments we make in our daily lives. This habit begins as infants, as soon as we start learning a language. For example, when we look at an object and refer to it as a “chair”, it is after our brain has compared it with all other possible objects and concluded that it does indeed meet the necessary criteria. And immediately

on reaching this determination, we probably pass judgement as to other aspects of the chair, such as its design or how comfortable it may be.

Remember the nursery story of “Goldilocks and the Three Bears”? Straying into the home of the three bears, the little girl started testing the furniture, the breakfast porridge and the beds! The first chair was “too high,” the porridge “too hot” and the bed “too hard,” while the next was “too low,” “too cold” and “too soft”. She assessed each item until she found what was “just right”.

In many ways, we are like Goldilocks – constantly comparing and judging. Our mind has an idea of what an ideal meditation session should be like (“just right”), and when our practice falls short of this, we become perturbed. However, the Master imparts a simple yet profound insight by encouraging us to stop judging ourselves. Upon initiation, our Goldilocks- self should cease to be. We must send her home or, in other words, we must discard our deeply ingrained habit of judging, assessing or rating our performance.

In addition to not judging our meditation, masters encourage us to refrain from judging others. For instance, in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, Jesus Christ advises his disciples to “Judge not, that ye be not judged.” Jesus reminds his followers not to be quick to judge others; otherwise, we risk becoming involved in a circle of karma and invite judgement on ourselves. Suppose we let go of this acquired tendency of the mind. Then, instead of feeling disturbed by ideas of good or bad, of what should or shouldn't be, we would be more accepting.

We can apply the principle of non-judgment to our own outward lives as well. Hazur Maharaji writes, “Ours is to do our duty faithfully and leave the results to the Master. The soldier's duty is to fight and obey the commands.” So, if we accept that passing judgement on other people is not conducive to spirituality, we shouldn't judge our own lot either. If we have been given seva, we should be confident that it is helpful in one way or another. It's not for us to judge how beneficial it is or whether it's more or less valuable than the seva somebody else does. If we think the seva could be organized better, we can make suggestions, but it's up to those in charge whether they take these forward. If they don't, it's okay because our part is to do what we are given, just as a soldier does his duty and leaves the rest

to his general or the officer nominated by the general. Even if the soldier believes the general's officer is at fault, that's for the general to look after. If we can learn to judge less in our daily life, our minds will be calmer when we come to sit in meditation.

The well-known story of Bhai Bela illustrates the idea of unquestioning acceptance. This simple man was a disciple of Guru Gobind Singh and responsible for looking after the Master's horse. As Bhai Bela was uneducated, Guru Gobind Singh used to give him a few sentences to repeat each day to improve his command of language. One day, the Guru was in a great hurry to reach the battlefield; Bela, not understanding the crisis, asked for his day's lesson as usual. The Guru cried out as he mounted his horse, "O Bhai Bela, this is neither the time nor the place!" The simple-minded Bela mistakenly thought that this was his sentence for the day and repeated it constantly whilst going about his duties. The other disciples were highly amused. So when Guru Gobind Singh returned from the battlefield in the evening, they hilariously told him what had happened.

However, the Guru was touched by Bela's simplicity and devotion. Without questioning what his Master had said, Bhai Bela had repeated the phrase as best he could. Guru Gobind Singh said, "If he has repeated that this is neither the time nor the place, he will indeed be without time and place." And with his spiritual power, the Guru took Bhai Bela's soul up to experience that which is beyond reckoning. This is the value that the saints put upon the ability to let the mind go and focus unquestioningly on the Master's instructions.

Finding such simplicity is not the work of days or months, but often many years. Meditation is the key, and this is why the Master writes, "Please keep on with your bhajan and simran and try to be regular." If the mind is to be de-cluttered, we need the strength of our daily meditation session to keep the momentum going. But he also advises, "never strain yourself." Attending to meditation every day will cease to be a struggle and become – more reliably – a pleasure if we can relax in our daily life. As Baba Ji often reminds us, there's really nothing to be anxious about. Everything is running according to the Lord's will. As Goldilocks would have acknowledged, "It's just right."



Truth in a Nutshell

A Matter of Training

The change of character which comes about through the struggle to practice the presence of God is both a means and a result. You are offered the bait of delight. You taste it and it is withdrawn. Then with great care you watch yourself to see what are the most propitious moments and states of mind for this delight to reappear. You try not to let yourself get excited in your daily activities, either pleasurably or unpleasurably, because then at the time of meditation, your mind will not be still enough for your spirit to feel that presence. You plan your day with careful economy so as to allow the greatest amount of free time possible for meditation. Your whole life becomes a conspiracy with yourself to escape into God. And yet when escape is not possible, you cannot afford to allow yourself the least impatience, because impatience, too, defeats your end. So you see yourself slowly becoming quiet, calm, patient and aloof, and you wonder at yourself, and you wonder with great and secret joy. Because all this seems infinitely right, exactly what you were made for. And there is contentment in your heart, so deep as to be unruffled by surface annoyances.

Nancy Pope Mayorga, *The Hunger of the Soul*

* * *

When you positively put your mind in touch with the light and sound within, automatically you cease worrying. You get that bliss and peace and happiness within yourself.

And you are training yourself. Meditation trains you to accept what is in your destiny, if not cheerfully then at least with a smile. That is the purpose of meditation ... we must live in the present. Every day has to be lived. So we should plan for a day and then live it thoroughly and happily, and attend to our meditation.

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



Running with Scissors

Adults expect children to follow numerous rules, most of which are prohibitive. “Don’t do that!” was a phrase I frequently heard as a youngster. Occasionally, adults make up rules to preserve their own sanity, but most of the time, commands prohibiting certain types of behaviour are motivated by a desire to safeguard children from harm. My parents, for example, would often shout out, “Don’t run with scissors!” – a warning I found myself repeating to my children and, more recently, my grandchildren. The danger of running with scissors is obvious. Since small children fall over frequently, the risk of injury is so much greater if children should stumble while holding a pair of scissors.

The mystics have liberated themselves from the clutches of mind and maya and moved on to higher realms of consciousness. They were successful, metaphorically speaking, because they did not run with scissors. Realizing that spiritual teachers always advise (and act) in the best interests of their students, the mystics followed the instructions of their respective spiritual guides completely, consistently and faithfully.

Mystics know what gets in the way of expanding one’s consciousness. So they advise: instead of wasting your time on activities of little value, why not direct your energies to a practice of long-lasting benefit to your soul? But the problem is that we are self-willed as children (we want to do what we want to do), and we are still self-willed upon becoming adults and initiates of a true mystic. Acting on the impulses of immediate gratification isn’t something we grow out of, so the mind bristles at mystics’ instructions on how to rise above sensual desires. Even though the instructions benefit us, the mind doesn’t like being checked and protests against limits on its freedom. This is because the mind confuses freedom with licence – that is, doing what we want when we like. However, as the mystics point out, reacting to one’s every whim is not freedom but a form of slavery, leading to imprisonment. By continually indulging the senses, both the mind and the soul become entangled in numerous karmas binding them to the creation, one life after another.

Compassionate and ever-merciful, the mystics not only point out the folly of our ways but give us the key to unlock the prison in which we

cage ourselves. Yet so enslaved is the mind by the senses that, even while suffering the consequences of its licentious behaviour, it continues with the very thing that hurts it.

Mental stillness is possible. The mystics achieved this by complying fully with the instructions imparted by their respective spiritual guides. Apart from putting in the necessary hours of meditation practice, not only would they have listened to their own master's prohibitions, but also acted upon them. They would have discovered the obstacles to their inner progress and avoided them.

By contrast, we tend to do a lot of wishing and hoping while pursuing our spiritual goals. However, if we are sincere about wanting our spiritual endeavours to be effective, we should follow the example set by the mystics and stop running with scissors.



The Transformational Effect of Seva

Metamorphosis is the transformation of a creature into a completely different one, either through natural or supernatural means. The most common example of metamorphosis is the transformation of a caterpillar into a butterfly. Let us consider the butterfly's process for a moment in the light of seva, which has a similar transformational effect in our life.

After it is born the caterpillar indulges in the pleasures of its little world – eating incessantly. Its movement and worldview are limited to the plant on which it is born. But at some mysterious point, something clicks in its little caterpillar 'brain' and it loses all interest in eating. It finds a suitable spot, builds itself a cocoon, and withdraws into it.

There it completely surrenders itself to a magical process. Biologists tell us that in the cocoon the caterpillar dissolves into a sort of chunky, protoplasmic soup – some of its parts remain intact, some completely dissolve. Over time it regenerates into a completely new form – that of a beautiful butterfly....

Similarly, every disciple of a true master has the opportunity to undergo a process of spiritual metamorphosis. Initially we too are involved in incessant indulgence in the sense pleasures. But at some point, just like the caterpillar, we begin to lose interest. Seva – with body, wealth, mind and soul – is the cocoon we voluntarily enter. Each time we meditate, or cook a meal for the sangat, or do a round of simran – we are entering our spiritual cocoon.

Creatures like butterflies and moths enter the cocoon once, remain in it for several days, and come out transformed. Our process is different: we enter our invisible cocoon every day for little bursts of time and then are forced out again into a world of temptations. Over and over again we make sacrifices to set aside these temptations and re-enter the cocoon. This requires countless efforts – big and small – that slowly deepen our faith and resolve.... The process of transformation takes a lifetime to complete.

Seva (excerpt from RSSB book)



My Daily Maxims

I have faith in my Master. As he has blessed me with the greatest gift of all – initiation, I will do my best to experience the power of simran and bhajan for myself.

I believe in my Master. As he is the helmsman of my life, if I should find myself perturbed, I promise to remind myself that my Master – my guardian and my protector – would want me to leave my worries to him to sort out.

I trust my Master. As he is doing all he can to help me reach him in Sach Khand, should I become upset by life's slings and arrows, I will not only try to follow my Master's example by remaining positive but will remind myself of the karmic divine law. I will smile and think, "Whatsoever is happening is due to my past actions. This is the way to pay off my karmic debt so I may join my Master as quickly as possible."

My Master loves me. I am no poet, nor can I sing; in fact, I possess no unique talent. Only by doing what he asks, which is to meditate for two and a half hours each day, can I express my love and gratitude to him.



Overcoming Meditation Hurdles

There is a deep-seated yearning within all of us that overrides the myriad ways our individual lives differ. Our daily tasks such as going to work, looking after the family, cleaning the house, or cooking, can leave us wondering, “Is this it?” Is the sole purpose of human life nothing more than completing one’s daily chores? If so, why do we still feel that we need something more meaningful?

The mystics tell us that the purpose of life is to merge with the Creator. However, as long as we are entangled in the world of mind and maya, such a union cannot occur. Even though we might be attuned to the soul’s yearning, we find it difficult to make an adequate response. This is because the soul is knotted with the mind and, while the mind is desperate to fulfil the soul’s yearning, it mistakenly chases one sensual desire after another. The eighteenth- century Indian mystic Sant Charandas describes our situation this way:

*The mind remains under the control of the senses,
and discrimination remains under the control of the mind. How then
can concentration be achieved,
when the chain of command is reversed?*

To give real meaning to our existence, we need to liberate the soul by withdrawing our attention to the eye centre, as this is the most effective method for weaning the mind away from worldly attractions. As initiates, we are challenged by little things. When the alarm goes off in the morning, we have a choice to make: get up or go back to sleep. That choice shows what our priorities are and whether we have understood the nature and the magnitude of the gift we have been given. Some of us may be very committed and – do or die – put in our effort every day. But many of us may struggle to do so. Why is this? What are the various hurdles that come in our way?

The hurdles preventing us from giving time to meditation are specific to each of us but, in one way or another, they will all be rooted in the five vices of anger, greed, lust, attachment, and ego. The mystics tell us that we can bring each of the passions under our control only by turning our attention

inwards. Giving time to simran during the day will help curb the mental and emotional reactions we experience when pulled by these passions – reactions that block our way to sitting quietly in meditation.

The mind's incessant need to avoid boredom by seeking novel ways to be entertained represents another barrier to our spiritual progress. While this hurdle has plagued disciples since the dawn of humanity, the challenge facing us is exacerbated by both the expansion in the variety of leisure activities on offer and the ease with which we can access them. Never before have we had so many different options vying for our attention at the mere click of a button. The three forms of entertainment probably impeding our meditation the most are television, socializing and social media.

Most of us have probably binge-watched multiple episodes of a television programme one, after the other. By succumbing to the programme producers' cliffhanger strategy, we fail to go to bed on time. As a result, we do not give our bodies and brains sufficient time to rest; consequently, we weaken our ability to fight the desire to stay asleep when the alarm sounds.

Socializing is another way in which we hinder our mediation if we fail to monitor it. Of course, we all need the support and comfort of family and friends with whom we can share our joys and sorrows. Aristotle, for instance, declared, "Man is by nature a social animal." Mystics also advise against living a reclusive life for the purposes of spirituality. However, they also encourage us not to become so dependent on others that we feel uncomfortable in our own company.

In the twenty-first century, technology has become a powerful force competing for attention. Our phones and laptops are installed with games and social feeds. Refreshing Facebook, browsing YouTube, checking WhatsApp messages – these are just some of the ways we have become addicted to our apps, making it all the more difficult to still our minds.

Overcoming meditation hurdles

The following changes to our lifestyle might help us overcome the hurdles we encounter when trying to still the mind.

First, as advised by our Master – who says the simplest things with the deepest meaning – we are to keep a balance. With these three little words, the Master gives us the essence of how we can follow a spiritual path while also meeting worldly duties and responsibilities. For example, he encourages us to live a householder's life because going to extremes eventually makes our minds rebel. Second, adopting a vegetarian diet, abstaining from alcohol and mind- altering drugs, and leading a good moral life form a strong foundation for spiritual work. Abiding by these principles will foster inner calmness and tranquillity and help our meditation practice flow more easily. As Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Spiritual Perspectives*, Vol. II:

Concentration is stilling your mind at the eye centre. The real concentration is to be here at the eye centre because this is the seat of the soul and mind knotted together. From here our consciousness spreads into the whole world through the nine apertures. To withdraw the attention to the eye centre, to still the mind, that is concentration.... Be still, still your mind and be with God. Only then can we be with the Father.

Our meditation is a gradual realization of something that is already within us. Stilling both mind and body is the first step to raising our consciousness to the level where we can see the Radiant Form of the Master within.

The creation of good habits is a third way to help control the mind. Habits are a powerful force. We all know how to create a new habit: just do the same thing day after day, and it soon becomes habitual. This is how we must establish a daily programme of meditation. Finally, feeling contented with what we have is another way to stop the mind from chasing after material desires.

Fostering such a spirit of contentment is aptly illustrated in one of Hazur Maharaj Ji's visits to a local satsang centre. As recounted in *Treasure Beyond Measure*, one evening, Hazur asked an overseas visitor to accompany him as he toured a local satsang complex to see the arrangements in place. It was about ten o'clock on a cold February night. Because the number of satsangis exceeded the available bed-spaces, many were sleeping under the trees, covering themselves with only a thick

cotton sheet. In the morning, the overseas visitor said to Maharaj Ji: “I felt very sad, for people were lying on the bare ground under the tents and even in the open under the trees. It was very cold, and they had only ordinary cotton sheets or mats with which to cover themselves. I was shocked; their standard of living is very poor.’ Maharaj Ji smiled softly and said, ‘Yes, Sam, their standard of living is very poor, but their standard of contentment is very high.’”

The message we get from this story is to focus more on our basic needs rather than our desires. We need to slowly wean our minds away from materialistic desires and lead a simpler life.

The Master often tells us to deprogram our minds. In the same way that we sometimes get rid of unwanted stuff in our homes to free up space, we must learn to declutter our mind from past impressions, social trends, and the other pressures hindering our meditation. Now that we have made a choice to follow the path, let us do our best to please our Master.

The Master often reminds us to put our words into action. This is it – we have been given a golden opportunity. Grabbing it with both hands, we should daily dedicate two and a half hours to meditation as expected by our Master.

So, let us focus on the ways that mystics have advised us to tackle this mind. With dedication and consistent practice, let us go within to pierce the veil of ignorance and see the light within.



Who Knows Best?

My son, a bright young lad, and I often have long conversations about life. When he was younger he used to say to me, “I go to satsang because you take me, but when I get older I’ll decide if I want to go to satsang or not.”

In response, I’d ask my son, “Do you think you’re the one in control, that you’ll decide whether you’re going to satsang or not?”

And he would adamantly reply, “Yes, of course!”

One Sunday, a chain of events took place that changed my son’s thinking. Alone at home and still in bed half-asleep, my son heard the house telephone ring non-stop but, as is common for our children, he chose not to answer it. So it wasn’t until the ringing from the house phone switched to his mobile that he thought, “Oh this must be important, I’d better answer it.”

On the other end of the call was my older brother, a builder, who was in the midst of renovating our bathroom. He said, “I’m looking for your parents as I need to collect the tool box that I left at your house. Can you ask them to bring it to satsang, please? This will save me time as I need to fix a leak at a friend’s house.”

My son said that his parents were still in Haynes Park.

My brother said, “But I’ve just heard a rumour that Baba Ji is coming to our centre” The conversation ended.

My son looked at the clock, and it was 9:50 a.m. Jumping out of bed, he quickly washed, dressed, and left the house in ten minutes flat.

Twenty minutes later, he’d arrived at the satsang centre, and was seated near the door at the back of the small school hall. He looked around for any hint of a surprise visit from Baba Ji but everything seemed normal. As the centre’s secretary walked past, my son scrutinized him, searching for any signal of a surprise visit from Baba Ji. With no giveaway clues from the secretary, my son remained none the wiser.

Suddenly, Baba Ji entered the hall and, passing my son, walked straight to the stage.

There were a lot of elderly people in the local sangat, many of whom found it difficult to walk without the use of a walking stick. Sitting close

to the microphone, they all took the opportunity to ask Baba Ji questions. Nor did my son miss such an opportunity.

Very excitedly, my son told me, “Mum, the microphone was right next to the stage, Baba Ji’s face was so close to mine!”

Our Master often says that if everyone’s desires were to be fulfilled, there would be chaos in the world. On the day he visited our local centre, instead of going there as we usually do, we attended satsang in Haynes Park because my husband hoped that Baba Ji would be there. By contrast, my son hadn’t planned on attending satsang – anywhere. What prompted him to change his mind about spending a lazy Sunday morning in bed?

This small, mundane incident illustrates just how little control we have over our own destiny. Most of the time we are either at the mercy of the whims of our minds or are reacting to our external environment. Very occasionally, the Lord, taking mercy on us, sends us a friend to wake us up. Instead of dozing, we become energized to begin the greatest adventure of all. As Maharaj Charan Singh stated in *Spiritual Discourses*, Vol. II:

It is not because of the saints, but because of our karmas, our way of thinking, that we do not understand anything... No one can be blamed for this situation, for until the Lord showers his grace and mercy, how can anyone understand? In this world, everyone is blind, and it is only the Lord who has vision. Those who cannot see will only emerge from the darkness when the One who has sight chooses to call them and lead them into the light. Therefore only when the Lord showers his grace and mercy will we understand what is real in the world, and only then will our attention turn to worshipping the Lord.



The Final Word

Guidance from a Master

*Meditate deeply three times a day
in search of the Light
that's your soul.*

*Close yourself to the world
with thumbs in ears, eyes closed.*

*This is the way you open to meeting
the Self that shines within you –
the face of life itself,
the face that fills the universe.*

*But don't stop there, my son,
search for your master beyond all this....*

Continue meditating, my child.

*I will clear your doubts one day – these doubts
that come to mind, don't speak of them now.*

And I won't inquire about your meditation.

I tell you now:

*first see whiteness, then bright moonlight,
then the sun like a great firefly in the sky.*

Keep on searching, sit steady at the eye centre.

*Then keep gazing at the swans who appear –
soon you'll come to see your Self.*

But still don't leave your meditation.

*Soon the Imperishable, the Lord of body and soul,
will appear in your heart.*

*Keep on gazing, Eknath –
finally you'll see that he is you.*

Ekhnath, in *Many Voices, One Song*



BOOK REVIEW

Be Human – Then Divine: Hierocles’ Commentary on the Pythagorean Golden Verses

BY DONKA MARKUS AND BEVERLY CHAPMAN

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Be Human – Then Divine brings the message of ancient Greek philosophers to the modern reader through an exploration of just seventy-one lines of verse – the famous Pythagorean *Golden Verses*. *The Golden Verses* are traditionally attributed to Pythagoras, who lived in the sixth century BCE. Composed orally, they were passed down orally until they were committed to writing around 300- 350 BCE.

This book approaches the *Golden Verses* through the medium of a commentary on them by Hierocles, a Platonist philosopher who lived around 430 CE. Hierocles described the *Golden Verses* as “the most perfect imprint of philosophy, a summary of its more important teachings ... written down by those who have already made the journey on the divine path for those who come after.” He summed up their message as “One must become first human, and then god.” He believed that an ancient universal and timeless Truth existed, and that the *Golden Verses* were an expression of that Truth.

As the authors explain, Hierocles likely compiled his commentary from notes taken during oral discussions with students. Teachers in this tradition did not lecture, but taught through dialogue, sometimes posing questions to students in the Socratic style, to help them think more deeply, unearth their assumptions, and see beyond their preconceptions.

Be Human – Then Divine begins with a prologue and introduction giving necessary background into Hierocles’ time and place and into Greek philosophy. Then, taking two or three lines of verse at a time, the authors present Hierocles’ comments on them together with relevant quotations from other philosophers whose writings were studied in his school. The authors have structured these chapters as if Hierocles were meeting with a group of students over the course of thirty days, each day devoted to a few lines of verse. Occasionally the authors create a short fictional dialogue with

the students to further delve into the meaning of the verses. Though these dialogues are fictional, the words Hierocles speaks are direct quotes from his written commentary. The dialogues let us “hear” Hierocles’ statements in the context of questions students might have asked, and are set off from the rest of the text typographically. This unique and engaging aspect of the book adds nuance and context to the verses.

The Golden Verses are divided into two parts. Part One: Practical Philosophy focuses on practical insights for living as a good human being (verses 1-44); and Part Two: Contemplative Philosophy discusses contemplative practice and insights (verses 45-71).

To take an example from the practical philosophy of Part One, verses 17-18 say:

*Whatever pains mortals receive from fate
by divine dispensation, whatever your fate,
bear it and do not resent it.*

Hierocles explains how “the interweaving of our power to choose (*proairesis*) and divine judgement produces fate,” based on our actions in countless previous lifetimes. To add context to Hierocles’ comments, the authors quote other ancient Greek philosophers explaining, in vivid language, how, unless we exert conscious effort to make right choices, impressions from our previous lives doom us to repeat mistakes. Hierocles explains that whatever divinity has measured out for us to go through, it is for our benefit, like medicine. If we remember this, we won’t “suffer miserably without understanding,” and we can avoid “sliding into reactivity.”

Philosophy in the ancient world was defined as “a striving for wisdom, or the freeing and turning of the soul away from the body, turning towards what truly is.” For these philosophers, the authors explain, practical philosophy – focusing on our way of life – forms a foundation for contemplative philosophy, which leads to “divine wisdom” and ultimately returns the soul to its original divine state. Hierocles wrote:

*Practical philosophy makes people good through the acquisition of virtues,
while contemplative philosophy brings them to likeness to divinity through
the enlightenment of intuitive insight ... and through Truth. As far as we are
concerned, lesser attainments precede the greater ones.*

He further explained why those “lesser attainments” should come first:

It is easier to balance human life through the practice of moderation than through complete surrender, which would happen by turning completely to contemplation.

The disciplines of practical philosophy help the practitioner develop the inner state of balance, harmony, and stability needed for contemplative practice.

Part Two, dealing with contemplative philosophy, offers deep insights into the nature of contemplative practice, as well as inspiring encouragement to persevere. For example, verse 45 says:

*Follow these teachings with effort, practice them
with attention, love them with intensity.*

Hierocles' commentary stresses the need to combine all three elements: steadfast effort, focused attention, and intense love. As the authors explain, "Effort and attentive practice would be drudgery without love, while love without the other two would be a fleeting sentiment."

Subsequent verses offer the promise that, with effort and attention, one will come to know three truths for oneself through contemplative practice:

*When you have mastered these teachings,
you will know the common essence of immortal gods
and mortal humans;
You will know how this essence
runs through all things, how it rules all ...
You will come to know that the miseries people carry
are self-chosen.*

Hierocles explains that the only way to free ourselves from such miseries "is to turn to the divine being. Only they discover this who awaken the eye and the ear of the soul."

Hierocles called contemplative philosophy "the divine path." Woven into his entire commentary is the understanding that the soul is innately divine and that, as human beings, we have the potential to return to divinity. Verse 63 exhorts all to seek this return:

*Now, you there, take heart! For divine is the origin of mortals,
to whom Sacred Nature reveals and shows all secrets.*

To learn these divine secrets, Hierocles explains, one must turn one's attention within, "towards the things that the divine being is revealing to us." He stresses the need to be receptive: "Divinity does not show it to all, but to those alone who of themselves have lifted their eye up to contemplate and receive what is being shown." He assures his students that practising earnestly, being receptive to what the divine is revealing, can lead to an end of the repeated rounds of birth and death or, as Hierocles puts it, "salvation from the toils here below."

The results of the revelation are the healing of the soul, its salvation from the toils here below, its internal awareness of divine gifts, and its becoming a citizen of the Father's city.

A final promise of the *Golden Verses* is that, for those who follow their guidance, "you will be deathless, undying divinity, mortal no more." The volume closes with a last fictional dialogue as Hierocles draws his students close to him and discusses this final verse, which he calls "the most beautiful objective of our struggles ... the most perfect fruit of philosophy."

