

November / December 2019

Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

contents

- 4 A Gentleman with Good Credentials
- 8 The Value of Initiation
- 12 A Divine Love Affair
- 14 Only Three Things
- 18 Doubt: A Crisis of Faith
- 22 Learning to Love
- 26 Our True Identity
- 28 Mastering Meditation
- 32 The Wound Within
- 35 The Incredible Journey
- 38 A Homily on Happiness
- 39 Book Review

Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre
Guru Ravi Dass Marg, Pusa Road, New Delhi-110005, India
Copyright © 2019 Science of the Soul Research Centre®

Articles and poems that appear without sources have been written by the contributors to this magazine.

VOLUME 15 • ISSUE 6 • NOVEMBER / DECEMBER 2019

A Gentleman with Good Credentials

This year 2019 is drawing to a close, and 2020 is upon us. Now is the time when most of us reflect on the year gone by. We reflect on what we consider to be our successes or, if we are brave, attempt to analyze what we see as our failures – maybe using them as a basis to formulate all our new year’s resolutions.

When going through this self-analysis we realize that most of us are at war every day, without even knowing it: in rivalries with co-workers to get a promotion; in competition with other parents to get our kids into the best schools; in battles with our loved ones over money; or pestering our children about leaving their dirty socks on the floor. Most ironic of all, we’re constantly at war with ourselves: to stick to our diets; get a better job; make more money; be the perfect parent.

We were raised to believe in the dream of struggling and achieving. Despite our best efforts, we may have experienced failure and disappointment. Or maybe we succeeded. Maybe we got the job, the house, the romantic partner we always thought we wanted. Then we discovered we still weren’t happy. They didn’t really fill that empty place that we thought they would. So what is the solution to our dilemma? The solution we crave, the Master tells us, is letting go, being detached.

The call to let go lies at the core of many spiritual traditions. Non-attachment to outcomes, surrendering desires, opening to the guidance of a higher power, relinquishing the ego, forgiveness – all entail letting go. Why is letting go so important? Holding on limits our perception and obscures our true nature. Moreover, it lies at the root of most of our suffering. Letting go, on the other hand, brings relief, ease, joy, and love.

But if letting go is so important, why don’t we just do it? The answer is that it is not as easy as it sounds. To appreciate why letting go can seem so difficult, we need to understand why we hold on, and what we hold on to. To answer these questions we must delve into a more fundamental question: What do we really want?

When we go deeply into this question, we find a common theme behind all our desires. We want to feel better. We may give this inner feeling different names – joy, happiness, inner peace, satisfaction,

well-being – but however we describe the quality of mind we seek, the underlying motivation is the same. We are looking to avoid pain and suffering, and find a more enjoyable state of consciousness.

We may think that it is not wrong to enjoy the good things of life. But too often they possess us, and we come to rely on them so heavily that we cannot imagine living without them. Though surrounded by abundance, we seem to be more fearful, not less. Soami Ji says that we are so attached to the creation and love it so much that we have forgotten the Lord, forgotten our true home, and forgotten who we really are.

Our attitude toward life should be not how can I please myself but rather how can I please the Lord? In pleasing him, we will find our happiness. And how do we please him? Maharaj Charan Singh Ji says in *Die to Live*:

You cannot serve the Master in a better way than by following his instructions and living his way of life. We can serve the Master by following his teachings, and by living the teachings, thus bearing the fruit for which this human birth has been given to us.

We are told that the passions that live in the mind are among our biggest hindrances. Of these attachment is the most insidious. Why? Because attachment is deceitful. It comes as a gentleman with good credentials. It announces itself as our friend and ally. Its ideas are plausible. So it readily gains a place in the family as a close friend. It does seem so very reasonable and proper that one should have and enjoy wife, children, positions of honour, money and houses, lands and securities. Indeed, we may concede that such things are necessary. And then our gentle friend, attachment, steps in with such benevolent airs and says: 'Yes, surely you must give diligent attention to these things; it is your duty.'

We must remember that the liberation of our own soul is the only real reason that we are in this world. Nothing else counts. But it is the sole purpose of attachment to keep us from doing that one thing. At present we are dead as far as the inner worlds are concerned and we are alive here, in this physical world. Now our sphere of activity needs to widen – to allow us to discover new worlds, just as Columbus discovered America.

So long as the mind has not developed the capacity to discard the impressions of this physical world, it cannot sit inside, disconnected from this world, nor can it have access to the inner realms. But it has the capacity to do so and it has to be trained. This is a slow affair, though, and requires patience, perseverance, and faith. The task is difficult, but it can be done, and this is the object of our life.

If humanity is the top of creation, our responsibility is also great. We are born so that we may merge our soul in its Source and not be born again in this world. The greatest service one can render is to merge one's soul in that Ocean of peace and bliss, of which it is a particle or drop, by freeing it from the attachment of mind and matter. The ups and downs of life cause hindrances, but there is no obstruction which love and faith cannot overcome.

Force is useless; only love can detach us. We must adopt a positive approach to the problem – not to detach ourselves by force from something lower, but to attach ourselves through love to something higher. In *The Master Answers*, Hazur says:

Only attachment creates detachment. ... We have to attach our mind to a better object than the sensual pleasures.... We have to withdraw our attention up to this point (the eye centre), concentrate it here, and attach it to that Sound. That attachment will automatically detach us.

The soul is hopelessly and helplessly entangled in a most complicated snare. The objective of meditation is to free the soul from this snare. The Sound Current is the one and only power which cuts the chains and frees the soul. When we are connected with the Sound Current by a Master at the time of initiation, and we listen to this Sound and bring our attention nearer and nearer to the Sound Current, we cut the bonds and the soul becomes free and finally merges in the Ocean of which it is a drop.

Those of us who have been initiated have been given the priceless secret of how to do this, but are we making full use of it? We have no idea what we are losing by not letting go, by not making full use of the treasure of initiation and by not surrendering to the will of our Master. But in truth it is not in our power to surrender. All we can do is try to follow the instructions of our Master, in order to show our gratitude to him.

Thus, what is required of us in our search for union with God is an attitude of devotion. Devotion is the effort we make in order to foster a relationship with, and to deserve the affection of, the object of our devotion. Spiritual love is not devotion in itself – it comes to us as a result of devotion. Devotion is the means and love is the end.

But how strong is our desire to merge back into him, when compared with our attachment to this world? The question is: how many of us are still attached to our worldly loves? In order to merge back into him, we will have to recognize them for what they are, and with fervour and one-pointed determination seek only him. It is only then that attachment to him will lead to detachment from this world.



The Value of Initiation

We are not getting new information but a deeper insight.

Thomas Keating

We have probably all experienced it. Sometimes just one sentence from a speaker on a well-known and often-discussed subject can suddenly reverberate deep within us with new meaning. There is a well-known anecdote that illustrates this perfectly. The owner of a small business, a friend of the Brazilian poet Olavo Bilac, met him on the street and asked him: ‘Mr Bilac, I have decided to sell my small farm, the one you know so well. Could you please write an announcement for me for the paper?’

Bilac wrote: ‘FOR SALE: A beautiful property where birds sing at dawn in extensive woodland, bisected by the brilliant and sparkling waters of a large stream. The house is bathed by the rising sun. It offers tranquil shade in the evenings on the verandah.’

Some time later the poet met his friend and asked whether he had sold the property, to which he received this reply: ‘I’ve changed my mind. When I read what you had written, I realized the treasure that was mine.’

Sometimes seeing something through someone else’s eyes can be a really good thing. Do we perhaps need someone to describe this gift of initiation that we have been given, to fill us once more with appreciation, like Bilac’s friend when he read the advertisement for his property?

What exactly do these words, ‘the gift of initiation,’ mean? It quite simply means that a true Master has taken a soul under his protection. He has reconnected that soul to the Shabd, God’s Sound Current, and has undertaken the responsibility to lead and guide that soul to its original home in Sach Khand, the highest spiritual region.

Whatever we have was written into our destiny, and that destiny was created through our own past actions. But into our destiny for this lifetime something else was written. For reasons best known to the Lord, we were chosen to receive initiation from a true Master – something of such immense value that it cannot be comprehended by our feeble human minds. Let us not start taking it for granted to the extent that an advertisement of its beauty and value is needed to bring us to the full realization of what we have.

After initiation the Master's astral form is waiting for us at the eye focus. This is a fact stressed by the Masters repeatedly. All we need to do if we want to reach that form is our daily simran with loving devotion and concentration at the eye centre. This may sound simple, but we all know how difficult it can be and how the mind can play havoc with one's thoughts. The secret is not to give up, but to persevere. In *The Dawn of Light* Maharaj Sawan Singh says: 'In attempting one's best, his duty is over; the rest lies with the Master.'

Attempting one's best – that is, of course, the basis upon which our whole pursuit depends. If we do that, our duty is done, and the rest is up to the Master. Whether we are truly doing our best depends upon how strongly we desire to reach the ultimate goal of this path and whether we realize the magnitude of what we have been granted.

Bilac's friend had to read the description of his property before he realized the value of it. We have so many books where we can read descriptions of our spiritual heritage. Let us not neglect our duty. Isn't becoming blasé and taking our initiation for granted a bit like contemplating a 'For Sale' sign?

Luckily for us, this possession of ours cannot be sold. Initiation is a commitment that we made to take our Master's hand and allow him to see us back to our true home. Our commitment to him and his commitment to us are both necessary and the Masters always honour their commitments. Let us make sure that this precious treasure does not lie dormant, like something hidden away in a cupboard, seldom used and often forgotten. What a waste that would be!

We do not know how long this life is destined to be, so let us make the best use of our time. Tomorrow may be too late. Reading our books, attending satsang, remembering the path and the Master in discussions with fellow travellers are all reminders of the wonderful fact of the Master's grace and his love for us. These all help to motivate us to try to be worthy of his love.

This path is beyond precious. No material possession, no matter how great its value, can rival it. It is something that the soul can take with it when it departs from this plane to continue its journey. The wonder of this

gift is that the more attention we give to it the more precious it becomes. Spiritual practice enables us to appreciate its value.

In *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. II, Maharaj Sawan Singh says:

Love is the lifestream of this world and is also the essence of our life. It is the very core of purity and simplicity. Without it, the whole world is empty. It is the elixir that keeps life in full bloom.

One day, we will reach our goal – he has promised that. In the meantime, through meditation, we are working towards that goal, and every small victory that we achieve over the mind and its desires is a step in the right direction. This is not a path where a magic wand gets waved and instantly we find ourselves in Sach Khand. This is a path of steadfast, determined effort, which results in slow but sure progress. Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Die to Live*:

Meditation always does good. Sincere effort in meditation will also create submission, it will create that love.

Further on he says:

Without developing love for the Lord, nobody can reach the third eye. Unless we feel the pull of the Lord within, we won't even think of reaching the third eye. He creates the desire. He creates the love. He is the one who is pulling us from within.

And that is why we keep trying, even when it feels as if we are getting nowhere. He is pulling us, and he is working on us through our meditation. We should try to be more aware of his presence, and try to behave as if we were in his physical company.

Maharaj Charan Singh says:

The Master does not leave or forget the disciple after initiation. He is always with him, guiding and leading him. In his Radiant Form, he helps the disciple at every step, accompanying him throughout the spiritual journey. 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.

Die to Live

Sometimes we may stumble, sometimes we may fall, but with determined effort slow and steady progress must result. Success has been promised to us. Once we reach the eye centre the most difficult part of the journey will have been accomplished. After that, in his company, we will progress further to a state of true surrender. In the meantime we have to carry on with our journey and appreciate the small but significant victories we begin to achieve along the way.

As we face our situation, we need to carry on with our weak attempts and efforts. We must not become disheartened. With his help we will grow stronger – and he promises his help. But we must make the effort, showing through our puny attempts that we are sincere.

We have probably read enough books by now to realize that there is only one method: meditation. Simran and bhajan are the walking sticks we must use as we journey towards our goal. Our meditation is the answer to everything.

We are all struggling souls, and as such we may sometimes feel despondent, but never has a greater goal been set before us, never has a more precious treasure been given. And with this precious gift he also gave his promise to help us get there, to be with us every step of the way. He has given us his assurance that there are no failures on this path.



A Divine Love Affair

Fairly recently, for the first time, some of the words of the Sufi saint Shams of Tabriz have been translated into English and so become available to seekers not familiar with the Persian and Arabic languages. It was only in the 1940s that recorded sayings of Shams came to light, after lying undiscovered in Turkish libraries for more than seven centuries.

But who was he, this giant of a mystic whose writings remained hidden for so long? First of all, he was a highly unusual spiritual Master who apparently came for only one disciple. But what a disciple! He was none other than the man who would become the greatest and most prolific Sufi poet of all time, Jalal al-Din Rumi, better known to us simply as Rumi – whose poetry has remained highly popular till today, so much so that quite recently he was judged the best-selling poet and literary figure in bookshops throughout the United States!

Shams was born in the twelfth century in the city of Tabriz in Iran, then Persia, at a time of great turmoil. Islam was under pressure from the West because of the Crusades; and from the East there was a threat from Genghis Khan, the warlike Mongol leader who'd swept through Asia after conquering China and eventually also invaded Persia.

Shams travelled widely and lived simply, wholly wrapped up in his own close relationship with God. When Rumi was 37 years old Shams came to Konya in what is now Turkey to seek him out. Shams had been waiting, he said, until he saw that Rumi was mature enough to receive what he had to give to him. That was in the year 1244. Almost instantly their meeting sparked between them an intense and ecstatic spiritual love, a love that would change Rumi from a dignified and sober teacher and jurist into a wild, abandoned spiritual adept.

The initial differences between Shams and Rumi were immense. Whereas Rumi was a learned and highly respected legal and religious scholar, with quite a large following of his own, Shams was rough and even crude, with little respect for book learning and social niceties or refinements. One may have even suspected that he was illiterate, but he certainly was not. From childhood he was possessed of a yearning to see God, but

he was also well educated, with an extensive knowledge of Persian and Arabic poetry, science, astronomy, mathematics, and Islamic law.

Shams became Rumi's beloved friend and inspiration, leading him to the very peak of spiritual experience. Rumi saw in Shams the expression of God's beauty; he saw the very face of God in him. And Shams revealed to Rumi new and greater dimensions of divine love – he showed him a direct path to the Beloved through the heart, an ecstatic way of worship through poetry, music, and *Sama*, a meditative whirling dance which freed him from all restraints and limitations of self.

For 16 months the two were hardly ever away from each other, to the extent that Rumi's own followers became jealous and angry and started slandering Shams. The result was that Shams left Konya, leaving Rumi disconsolate and full of despair. Eventually he learned that Shams was in Damascus and he sent his son with gifts to bring him back. He also sent this poem:

*From the moment you travelled away,
I became separated from sweetness like wax from honey.
Burning every night I am like a candle,
But one with fire, deprived of the sweetness,
Away from your beauty.
Ruined has become my body, and my soul,
like an owl because of this!*

Shams could not resist Rumi's appeal to return to him, and he went back to Konya. They resumed their intensely close and ecstatic friendship. But in time Rumi's jealous followers again began to insult and harass Shams, and this time he left for good. No trace of him could be found after that. Some even believed that he had been murdered.

During their earlier separation, Rumi had withdrawn into himself, and in his agony he even stopped writing poetry. But now the loss of his beloved Shams ignited a fire in him, producing an outpouring of poetry full of love and longing. Day and night he composed his wonderful poetry. And now it's available to us in his *Mathnavi* – an epic poem consisting of some 25,000 rhyming couplets – and his *Divan*, a collection of about 35,000 poems full of an intoxicated love of God and the deepest longings of the heart.



Only Three Things

God Almighty asks only three things from all: the first is obedience; the second, contentment; and the third, remembrance. Obedience is worship, contentment is devotion, and remembrance is awareness.

Shams-e Tabrizi

Those are the words of Shams of Tabriz, a mysterious wandering dervish and spiritual teacher who lived some 700 years ago. He was a Persian poet-saint whose single disciple was the greatest Sufi poet of all time, Jalal al-Din Rumi, generally known to us simply as Rumi.

Obedience is worship, Shams says. And for us as satsangis, what is worship? Certainly not rituals or set prayers or gathering in some place of worship like a temple or mosque. It's humble and loving acceptance of someone's total authority over us and doing whatever he asks.

Shams strongly emphasized total obedience to the guru (or the sheikh, as he calls him). And he added a warning that if a disciple deviated even a little from the sheikh's command, he would not reach his goal. This is how he put it:

The sheikh's command is like a specially selected seed which will certainly germinate and grow into a fruit-bearing tree, make no mistake about it. Some people change or try to deviate from the command and then, when it does not bear fruit, they blame the sheikh. On his own, the disciple interferes with what he has been ordered to do. He thinks that he is nearing the completion of his work, but rather he is missing by hundreds of miles what otherwise would be close at hand.

Shams-e Tabrizi

Maharaj Charan Singh once defined obedience as the practical face of love. If we truly love him we will do what he asks us to do. As he told us:

Obedience is another word for submission. And submission is another word for driving out the ego. When we are proud or full of ego, we do not like to submit to anybody, we do not like to be obedient to anybody. ... When that love takes its place within us, all other things are driven out.

*Then there is obedience, there is submission, there is understanding.
All good qualities automatically take shape.*

Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III

Obedience is another name for submission, and submission is another name for driving out the ego. We regard these two as among the biggest challenges of our path. But they both start with simple obedience. Nothing else is needed.

The second thing that Shams says God wants from us is contentment, which he equates with devotion. In other words, to be happy and grateful for whatever has been given to us and not ask for anything more. This is accepting what the Lord has given us. This is living in the will of the Father.

Shams tells us that there's great comfort in acceptance of the Lord's will – in accepting whatever he gives us as our greatest good fortune. And he points out that since we can only have what is destined for us, there's absolutely no point in trying to get more. In his typically forthright way he says:

Just as one cannot escape death, so one's daily bread cannot escape him either. Because planning, in the face of destiny, is useless, effort without grace is of no avail. ... Because you cannot escape your death, cannot fulfil your desires, cannot be deprived of your daily bread, and cannot have anyone else's daily bread, then why are you killing your body with striving, O son of Adam?

Shams-e Tabrizi

'O son of Adam' means mankind of course. That's all of us. Then comes the big one: remembrance. Shams says this means awareness: constant awareness of the path we follow. Awareness of our every thought, word and deed, constantly trying to be the best person we can be.

Great Master equates remembrance with simran or repetition, the only way we can control our thoughts, our actions and even be saved from rebirth. He discusses this in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. I:

No one is free from repetition or remembrance of some kind. It is through this process that the worldly objects enter into every pore of our body,

mind and intellect, and man is virtually dyed in the hue of the world. It is because of this that the soul has to be born again and again. ... If we give up remembrance of the world and instead think of the Lord, we can easily gain the means of salvation.

Let's look at another aspect of remembrance. Who is it that we so often remember? Our own Master. And the chances are we're thinking of him with some degree of longing. And this is of course why we have a living Master – so that we can see him in all his glory and magnificence and fall in love with him; and then, through that love, come to yearn for him when we no longer have access to him. Then we will mourn for him, Maharaj Ji says, and we'll be the *fortunate* ones who mourn for him. This mourning, he says, is in fact feeling the separation from the Father, which becomes a real longing to go back to the Father.

Even if the Master is still in the flesh, there may be many times when we feel distant from him, sometimes even at the Dera when we're right there in his proximity. There may even be times when he deliberately makes himself distant from us. But even this has a purpose. Shams says even then we should not stop trying to please him:

When a veil comes between sheikh and disciple, it becomes like night. When darkness comes, then you must persistently praise him and strive to remove that veil. As much as the darkness increases and the sheikh appears more unpleasant to you, you must increase your effort to serve him. You should not be sad or disappointed by the duration of the darkness, for after prolonged darkness, prolonged light will follow.

Shams-e Tabrizi

The Masters *want* their disciples to feel the separation from them. The practical effect of our longing for that form of the Master – whom we have seen and known – is that the intensity of it will eventually bring us to the feet of his wondrous Radiant Form within.

That's what it's all about. Perhaps that's also why he may deliberately withhold sound and light from us in our meditation and even a sense of his presence. Our seeming failure in meditation and the deep heartache it brings are maybe also his instruments to ensure that our longing will eventually bring us to him inside.

Shams refers to this longing as ‘need’ – not just wanting our Beloved but *needing* him; recognizing that without him we are incomplete. We need him to make us whole again. And once we’ve felt this need and longing, our tears will carry us back to him and back to our Lord and Father. This need is a wonderful thing – a thing of great grace.

However, when we fall in love with our Master and long for him, we’re usually so concerned with *our* love for him that we don’t consider that *he* must have had great love for us in the first place. And even less do we think about the great love that the Lord must have had for his souls to start this whole game of love that would bring them back to him. He devised this whole mysterious game of separation because he wanted to make us aware of his love – and to make us love him the way he loves us. He wants us to become one with him.

This is the Lord’s play. It’s the method he’s devised to unite souls with him in conscious oneness. This is what it’s all about: to become not two, but One. It’s hard sometimes to remember that this whole path is designed around his great love for us, and that he is growing our love for him till it will become our one obsession – with a love so intense that eventually the two must become one. Hazur Maharaj Ji very often spoke of this intensity of love:

Love means to merge into another being, to become another being; to lose your own identity and to become another identity. ... He has separated us from him because he has created us and with that feeling of love, we can merge back into Him again.

Thus Saith the Master



Doubt: A Crisis of Faith

The core of any spiritual path is based on faith in three assumptions:

- God exists
- Our teacher is a true God-realized soul
- The teachings we follow are correct.

It is almost inevitable that at some point or other we may come to question our beliefs, since they are based neither on empirical evidence, demonstrable facts, nor personal experience. When this happens we find ourselves plunged into what can only be called a spiritual crisis.

We may find that the whole basis on which we've been living our life has become questionable and uncertain. We find ourselves lacking in both purpose and direction, and we start to wonder if we've been wasting our life in the pursuit of this ephemeral dream of spiritual liberation.

When we find ourselves plunged into this maelstrom of doubt and confusion, what can we do? *We go back to basics* and closely examine these three elements of faith on which our path depends.

Whether or not one believes in God is the most fundamental question, because without such a belief no religion or spiritual path can exist, since all of them are based on the existence of a higher power. So this must be our starting point: Do we believe in God? If we are undergoing a crisis of faith, this is the question that we need to address first. To find ourselves doubtful or unsure is not entirely unreasonable, since belief of any kind is not based on hard evidence; rather it is based on what appeals to our reason and is in line with our intuitive perception of what is real.

When we look at the world through the eyes of an atheist, then all the wonderful manifestations of life in the universe would seem to be merely happy accidents of nature. To an atheist, the universe exists in chaos, and anything that happens in this disorganized environment is just an accident, a random coming together of all the ingredients for this situation to occur. But is this what we observe?

If we look closely at a simple thing like a flower, we can see that it is neither random nor chaotic – it follows a rule. Its petals and leaves are arranged in precise geometrical patterns. Looking further afield into the

winds and the oceans, to tides and weather – these days these things can be predicted with an extremely high degree of confidence and accuracy, because they also comply with certain rules or laws.

If we look down through a powerful microscope and then look up through a powerful telescope, we see both very small and very large objects conforming to very similar rules. In fact some rules seem to apply to virtually every situation, and we call them *universal laws*. Where does all this come from? Is it possible for the astounding geometrical intricacy of a flower or a snowflake to be an accidental arrangement arrived at by random and chaotic processes?

Great Master said:

But one thing should be easily comprehensible even to the dullest of brains. That is that all this magnificent creation, the sun, moon, billions of stars, lands, mountains, oceans, and all this universe has not come into existence by itself. In this world of cause and effect, there is no effect without a cause. There is a doer for every act done.

Call of the Great Master

So even though we cannot *prove* God's existence, there is sufficient evidence to encourage us to adopt a belief in him as a *working hypothesis*.

We may have an issue with the concept of a true living Master. After all, consider what we mean when we refer to someone as being a Master. We are saying that here is a man who appears to be an ordinary man on the outside, but who has realized God on the inside. It really is a lot to digest. Who could be blamed for finding this a bit hard to accept?

Baba Ji has asked on several occasions: 'How do you know that I am not a complete fraud?' We are unable to assess the spiritual merits of our best friends, what to say of someone who people say is a spiritual Master. How can the primary school student assess the qualifications and capabilities of a professor of quantum physics? The fact of the matter is that we are not able to assess the merits of a Master at all until we ourselves have made considerable spiritual progress. Again, this is a matter of faith and belief.

So in the face of our inability to assess if a Master is genuine, what can we do if we are in the throes of a spiritual crisis? We can look at the example presented by past Masters in order to learn what kind of

characteristics are typically manifest in a true Master and what is the essence of their teachings.

Julian Johnson says in *With a Great Master in India* that the Great Master would work on average 20 hours a day and would only sleep about three hours. What ordinary man could do this, and what ordinary man would want to?

One essential characteristic of a true Master is that he teaches the path of the five shabds, the path of the divine Sound Current. This has been a defining feature of the teachings of all the great mystics of the path to God-realization.

If we feel sufficiently encouraged, we may accept the Master's authenticity as another working hypothesis, so that we may progress to the next and most important stage of practising the path.

In *Call of the Great Master*, Maharaj Sawan Singh says:

The Guru never says that he is the Guru. He says, 'You may look upon me as a brother, friend, tutor, son or servant, but please do what I say and go in.' When you succeed in this, you will see for yourself the position and power that the Guru holds.

Assuming that we have accepted the existence of a divine power *and* a true living Master as working hypotheses, how do the mystics propose that we prove these hypotheses to be true?

First we need to get our life in order: we need to adopt a lifestyle that is conducive to our intended spiritual practice, as opposed to the traditional lifestyle of our culture, which might only undermine it and lead to frustration and defeat.

We need to become vegetarians in order to avoid the heavy karmas involved with killing higher-order creatures for our food. Instead we make the conscious choice to live on a diet that avoids meat, fish, fowl and eggs and anything containing these. We also need to avoid alcohol and recreational drugs, because these things cause the mind to scatter, and often lead us into bad situations which could retard our spiritual progress indefinitely. Then we need to adopt a moral, upright life. Morality is a tricky subject, and we often hear many and varied, sometimes conflicting, viewpoints as to what constitutes morality. The

key element to understanding morality may be simply expressed as *those actions consistent with love*.

These comprise the lifestyle that any would-be spiritual practitioners need to adopt in order to support their spiritual endeavours. The really important element of spirituality, however, is the spiritual practice itself. It is meditation that gets us out of the rut of mindlessly pursuing sensual pleasures and further entangling ourselves in the world.

The process of meditation involves the conscious redirecting of our attention away from the senses and the objects of sense inward to the eye centre. This repeated activity will lead us to a point where our addiction to the sense pleasures and our attachments to the people and things of this world will begin to fade out, allowing our consciousness to become anchored within.

There is a point in this process where one passes beyond the eye centre and comes at last into the presence of the Master's Radiant Form. It is at this point where our faith in the Master is fully rewarded, the hypothesis we adopted about him is proved, and faith gives way to certain knowledge.

At this stage the inner Master puts us in contact with the Shabd within and merges our consciousness with it. It is by our immersion in the Shabd that we travel on the true path, which is entirely internal and which takes us through many regions, culminating in our arrival at the feet of the Lord himself. It is here that our second hypothesis is proven and instead of mere belief we become possessed of absolute certainty and divine knowledge.



Learning to Love

The Great Master provides us with a powerful reminder of the pivotal role that love plays in our lives. In *Philosophy of the Masters*, Vol. III, he says:

The fire of love, being kindled, other virtues and gifts come of themselves. ... God is Love and the world lives by Love. It is, therefore, the duty of a human being to love. One who loves never injures the feelings of others.

This message presents us with a very real challenge: to work at fulfilling our responsibility to love. Although the world at large may be aware of the important role of love, it is not reflected in the way people behave. Baba Ji constantly reminds us that we need to work at becoming better human beings, and learning to love will surely do exactly that.

However, we have little understanding of the nature of love, and examples of love in action are not abundantly evident in the world. They are certainly not reported in the media, but at the Dera examples of love in action are evident all the time: thousands of sevadars going about the business of sweeping, cooking and preparing food; breaking bricks; carrying soil and concrete on their heads; erecting buildings and building roads – and all of this simply to please their Master. This is love in action, of the highest order.

Apart from this loving seva, Rumi advocates that there is another proactive approach to learning how to love. He says:

Your task is not to seek for love but merely to seek and find all the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

So, we need to critically and realistically examine everything we do, say, and think, to ensure that we are totally in line with the Master's will. Only in this way will we gradually remove the barriers to love that we have created within ourselves.

A major barrier preventing us from experiencing any progress on the path is the ego. We are told by the Masters that true divine love is only experienced when we become lost in our beloved. This means our ego-based identity evaporates as we become one with the One.

Another major barrier to learning how to love is our tendency to adopt a negative approach to life. Love, by its very nature, is rooted in positivity. Negativity is the absence of love. So choosing a more positive attitude to life will automatically remove a major barrier to love in our lives.

The Masters tell us that the sublime state of spiritual love is not something we can simply adopt – it is entirely up to the Master's grace. Maharaj Charan Singh explains this very clearly. He says:

We can only do meditation, the rest we leave to the Father. Meditation will help us be receptive to his grace. He gives the love – we have only to become receptive to this love. He is the one who gives his own love. He pulls us from within.

This brings us back to the most basic and most important understanding of our entire journey on this path – *everything comes from our meditation*. Without meditation we will go nowhere. It is this intense focus on our meditation that will assist in removing the barriers to love.

So our attaining this sublime state of divine love is entirely in his hands. The only thing that is in our hands is to ensure that we are living in the will of the Master, to become more receptive to the divine love we so earnestly need. And in the light of all his gifts, that surely is the very least we can do in return.

Baba Ji has told us on many occasions that the path is about becoming better human beings. And in *Philosophy of the Masters*, Great Master says:

Humanity simply means love for the Lord and his creation. Its other name is sympathy or compassion, fellow-feeling or heart-felt attraction. Its proof is that one's heart melts like wax on seeing the suffering of another. ... A man should feel for others and consider their sufferings as his own.

This should encourage us to take a long, hard look at where we stand, as regards adopting love as the guiding code of conduct in our lives. The vessel of our heart is the seat of love – so we can start by ensuring that our heart is not soiled by persistent thoughts of anger, lust, hatred, jealousy, hostility, greed, materialism, and selfishness.

The next step could be to find ways of living this love by integrating a loving attitude into our daily lives. For this to be effective, we need to

identify and focus our awareness on virtues and values that will promote the habit of practising love. The mystics say that the divine love we seek can be kindled only by the grace of the Master – but that shouldn't deter us from embracing a loving approach in everything we do in our lives.

In *Philosophy of the Masters*, the Great Master provides eight virtues or guidelines we can follow to assist us in adopting a loving approach in our everyday lives – and becoming better human beings. These are: compassion, contentment, forgiveness, truthfulness, sweetness, austerity, charity, and cleanliness or purity.

The first and most important of these virtues is compassion, and this paves the way for many of the others, such as contentment and forgiveness.

The Great Master says:

Persons without compassion have human forms but do not deserve to be called men, as they are ruled by animal passions. Obstinance, selfishness, cruelty and injustice are a part of their nature.

Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. III

So, in order to love we need to ensure that our heart is purified and unpolluted. This process can be facilitated by gradually integrating these virtues into our daily lives. The mystics tell us that love is our life. For most people, however, the true nature of love is a mystery. This extract, from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, the nineteenth-century Swedish theologian, uses a beautiful comparison to help us understand the nature of love, and how it relates to our life. He writes:

We can get some idea that love is our life from the warmth of the sun in our world. We know this warmth acts like the life shared by all earth's plants, because when warmth increases in the spring, plants of all kinds sprout from the soil. They dress themselves in their leafy finery and then in their blossoms and eventually in fruit. This is how they 'live.' When the warmth ebbs away, though, as it does in autumn and winter, they are stripped of these signs of life and they wither.

Love works the same way in us, because love and warmth correspond to each other. This is why love makes us warm. God alone – the Lord – is love itself, because he is life itself.

I'm sure we all identify with this description and have, at some point, experienced the warmth Swedenborg is writing about, but this comparison begs the question: what can we do to retain and increase that warmth in our lives? If the Master were to answer this question, we know what he would say: meditation.

In *Spiritual Gems* the Great Master says:

The Master is waiting inside for his pupils to come in and partake of his grace and love. It is our fault that we do not reach his 'feet' in the astral plane, above the eyes.

So it is entirely up to us if we wish to go within. This emphasizes that the first and foremost duty in our lives is to attend to our meditation. With concentrated meditation in its prioritized place in our lives, we will be opening up every possible channel to welcome and nurture the principles of love in our daily living. As the author of *Living Meditation* says: 'We need to realize that every time we sit for meditation, we are doing the most important thing a human being can do.'



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. One example of this is to ask, ‘Who am I?’

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

But if we look at our lives in these terms, as measured by external 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 you actually see the star? That star’s light took years to get here, and only now do you see it. That star could actually 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. Bear in mind that the closest star to us is Proxima Centauri, which is over four light years away. This means that if it blew up, we would only know about it four years later, so while looking at the night sky we are actually looking into 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. We are apart from that. What we are looking at is a karmic pattern. This pattern was constructed from our actions over many lifetimes and assigned to this one. We therefore meet a particular person at a certain 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. But we get confused and think these were all decisions that we have made now, in the time frame of our current life. But this is a mistake. Actually these things happen in conformance with the karmic pattern that is assigned to us and which we brought with us into this life.

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

Behind the layers of mind and illusion that envelop us is something that one could possibly label as Being. Our being is what is left when we strip away the karmic pattern of our destiny and the veneer of cultivated and learned behaviours that we all have. It exists independently of all that and all our history, our associations, our relationships and our 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 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 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 Son of God, 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. This destiny is for our 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.



Mastering Meditation

The purpose of any spiritual path is to end suffering and to find peace. To this end, on the universal way of spirit there is one thing we need to master: the art of meditation.

In a short note to *The Art of Loving*, the philosopher and psychologist Erich Fromm points out that, though we want something as abstract and sublime as love, we must first attend to the basics of learning and mastering any art. There are four essentials to mastering an art, whether it be playing the violin, performing surgery, mastering archery or practising meditation. They are discipline, concentration, patience, and ultimate concern.

Let us consider discipline. Intention is the roadmap, discipline the driver. Finding the time and dedication required to achieve our goals is impossible without self-discipline and the ability to delay gratification. Do what is right, what you must do; not what is 'nice' to do. The gap between theory and putting it into practice is willpower. For example, we all know the theory of how to diet or to save: burn more calories than you consume; spend less than you earn. However, most of us fail, not because we need to read another book, or learn a new theory, but because we lack the self-discipline to stick to the programme and say 'No!' when the impulse to consume overwhelms us.

Who is in charge? Who is in control? Currently, our will or higher mind is powerless and running after the objects of sense, and our higher self, the soul, is just a helpless passenger. We have to reverse this trend. The self needs to awaken in order to activate our willpower to take hold of the reins and command the senses to do what they should do. In other words, to stop being a victim of the senses but be a master of the senses. Discipline grants freedom; it does not constrain us. Self-control is liberating, not limiting.

Furthermore, consistent self-discipline creates a strong mental pipeline for our own vibrant inner love and devotion to be channelled and directed constructively in the world. Only in this way, as Baba Ji says, can we begin to establish love as our strength and not our weakness. Discipline channelizes the strong forces of nature and applies them positively.

The second essential is concentration. We are scattered beings. Our soul currents are scattered, our thoughts are scattered, our emotions are scattered. Spiritual practice, like any task we need to master, needs us to direct our scattered attention from the many to the *one*. That is concentration: to collect, gather, and focus – just as light is everywhere but when passed through a magnifying glass at precisely the right angle, it becomes a powerful beam. We are already awake, present, and conscious, but in a diluted way. We merely need to concentrate our innate sentience too become one-pointed. Concentration is the key.

The following quote by Great Master lays emphasis on this:

I took instructions from my own guru and he gave me the exact method. That method is the same as all saints use, which is simply the concentrated attention, held firmly at the given centre. What else can we say?

Spiritual Gems

Maharaj Charan Singh also brings home a vital point: concentration is the crucial ingredient for happiness and joy, right now, in this life:

The more your mind is concentrated, the more happy you are; the more your mind is scattered the more frustrated you are.

Die to Live

Concentration creates automatic uplift, elevating our consciousness and perception, thus enabling us to glide over the painful thorns of life. When we are scattered, we get stuck and react. When we are concentrated, we glide. Concentration also makes us more efficient, thus freeing up our time and energy for more important things. Baba Ji is fond of telling us that we don't have a time problem, rather we have a focus problem.

Now we come to the third essential, patience. The mastery of any art, let alone meditation, is not going to happen overnight. Weeds grow rapidly, but oak trees take decades. A sustained struggle with the mind is impossible without patience. This is nothing new. Here we need the three p's: practice, perseverance, and patience.

There are many levels to this. Superficially, if one is undisciplined and scattered then everything seems to be chaotic and a big rush. This 'rush

energy' disturbs and agitates our mind, which creates great stress and disharmony in our lives, bleeding our precious life-energy.

More subtly, in meditation the waters of the mind must become calm and still like the surface of a smooth lake in order to reflect the light of our true self. Extreme stillness and patience are required for this. Our physical, mental, and emotional selves have to be gradually and patiently remade for the task at hand. Re-grooving the mind with new habits and creating the groove of simran takes years of patient application. If the mind is pressured or forced, it will react and push back with immense power.

More subtly still, who is it that is in such a hurry? The egoic mind says: 'I am the doer, I want results, I define the timetable of my own release.' Thus one will never become free, because it is the *barrier of ego* that must be worn down by patience and time. With the little strength of will that we have, we must take the rough rock of our immature self and daily place it in that inner stream. Eventually, with time, we will become smooth and polished. All we need to do is just put ourselves there and wait. Patience is a form of spiritual surrender, a state of humility. Impatience is of the ego, the 'little satan'.

Finally, there must be ultimate concern. To master an art, it must be the single focus of our life. Of all the concerns vying for our attention in life, what is our *ultimate* concern? Without a single focus, we cannot act coherently or progress.

That one focus, or goal, has a way of automatically integrating and pulling together all our diverse thoughts, actions, and habits in the service of that goal. Our main problem in life is competing centres of mental energy. For example, we say we want to be successful meditators, but at the same time also want to run a successful business, be a competitive athlete in our leisure time, and also manage a high-performing investment portfolio.

Each competing centre or obsession has different and conflicting energy demands, dietary requirements, rest requirements, and mental habits. Is it any wonder then that we are often drained, confused and never seem to get anywhere with our spiritual practice?

The greatest decathlete of all time, Daley Thompson, offers the solution. In an interview he once said: 'I firmly believe that in order to get the most out,

you've got to put absolutely everything in. Put all your eggs in *one* basket. Know where you want to get to, plan how to get there, prepare well, and then persist. That's all there is to it. No inner conflict, no divided loyalties, no split energy.

If there is one strategy the mind uses brilliantly to defeat us, it is 'divide and conquer'. Having a single focus protects us from this. All our other activities now become mere duties, a set of detached actions to go through lightly with a smile. Ultimate concern speaks to commitment, the final ingredient of mastery.

So, while we are holding the abstract goal of God-realization deep in our hearts, let us make our ascent to the eye centre our primary goal in life. According to a long line of Masters, this will let us achieve everything we ever dreamed of: peace, love, understanding, and spiritual liberation.



The Wound Within

We sometimes hear people say: ‘Oh, so-and-so is off the path, drinking alcohol and eating meat,’ and so on. And whilst it’s actually rather sad to hear such a thing, nevertheless it is not really possible for someone to go off the path permanently. The simplest explanation for this is that the reason that anyone comes on to the path in the first place never changes. We might allow ourselves to get somewhat distracted, one way or another, but the fundamentals never change.

Deep within us is a wound that never heals. It has been with us all along but we have consistently misunderstood what it is and, thinking that it indicates a *lack* of something in our lives, we run around like mad things, trying to fill up this bottomless pit.

We may imagine that it’s a lack of a meaningful relationship, and so we rush around seeking a ‘significant other’ to make our lives whole and complete. One relationship after another comes and goes, and still we do not achieve our objective. Do we stop and pause to think that maybe we’re barking up the wrong tree? No. We just continue rushing down the same dark street, achieving nothing but more and more entanglements in the material world and the suffering that accompanies them.

We may think we suffer from a lack of sufficient pleasure in our life, so we go rushing around in a hedonistic whirlwind, going from one indulgence to another, achieving at best the briefest of distractions from our inner pain, before rushing after the next fix, the next sensual indulgence.

We may think that more money will be the answer to all our problems – after all, what problem cannot be cured with enough money? But how much is enough? We beggar ourselves morally to gain favour in the workplace, to succeed, to get promoted, to rise to the top of the pile with its prestige and upmarket lifestyle. But if we ever actually get to the top, what do we find? Satisfaction? No. Peace? No. We are constantly stressed that we may lose what we have, and even what we do have barely scratches the surface of our deep and intrinsic need.

There are many, many ways in which we fail to understand what lies at the root of the problem, and they are all due to the fact that we never

look inside. We always assume that the answer is ‘out there somewhere,’ so we look for solutions where they cannot be found. Thus we are guaranteed failure until we stop and wonder what it is inside us that causes us to feel so miserable and dissatisfied.

Even then, it is only when we come across a true Master that we finally come to understand the real nature of the problem. The Master explains to us that the soul is longing for its true home. Our pain is the pain of separation that the soul has been suffering since it parted from its Lord so long ago to travel through the creation. Our journey has finally reached its lowest point, the bottom of the creation – that point where we find nothing whatsoever that can satisfy our innermost need and we have exhausted all possibilities available to us.

It is at this point where the soul finally turns in desperation to the Lord and realizes that he is the only one who matters, and it is only by returning to him that we can finally find peace, love, and bliss.

This has become our mission. In the person of our Master we have found our solution. He has given us the instructions that will guide us steadily and surely back to the Shabd – the original Word – which is the living presence of the Creator in his creation, and is the means and method of our journey back to our true home.

Having received initiation from the true living Master of our time, we can run this way or that, we can distract ourselves by continued indulgence in worldly pleasures – we can do whatever we want – but all this will do is postpone the day that we finally recognize, once and for all, that there is nothing out here for us anymore. There is no balm for our inner wound in the world around us. The sooner that we realize this and internalize it, the sooner we will start to recognize the great gift that our Master has bestowed upon us.

When one of us appears to have gone ‘off the path,’ what is really happening is that the mind is making a last, futile attempt to find joy and peace in the material creation. It is merely delaying the inevitable, the day it finally realizes that the only solution is to find its way back to the feet of the Lord within.

After untold ages journeying through the creation in all its various forms, and having experienced all that it has to offer, our weary soul has

had enough. It is only the recalcitrant mind that has not yet been totally convinced and so is still trying to immerse itself in the world. But the pull of the soul is growing daily; it will not be put off anymore. This pull will never go away. It will just get stronger and stronger till it pulls us to sit down and do our spiritual work.

This is what we need to do in order for the soul to win its freedom from bondage to this world, to be liberated from attachments and illusions, and finally to journey home to the realm of pure spirit and into the presence of the living Lord of all.



The Incredible Journey

In 1993 Walt Disney made the movie *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. The movie is a fictional story of three pets, two dogs and a cat, as they travel through the Canadian wilderness in search of their home and their beloved masters. We, on the other hand, have found our beloved Master, and the journey we have embarked on under his guidance is not fiction, but a journey into reality – the search for our original home.

But what exactly is this ‘home’ we are trying to reach? In Sant Mat it is called Sach Khand – but what does that mean to us? Do we have any idea what it is, where it is, or how to get there? We may think we understand how this incredible journey will unfold, but if this is based on images and fantasies projected by the mind, how accurate can that understanding be?

Soami Ji writes in *Sar Bachan Poetry*:

*I see the uniqueness
of the path revealed by the Master
as my mind and soul make contact with Shabd.
I see a great spectacle within
and like a maiden at the village spring,
my soul collects nectar from the sky.*

Soami Ji beautifully describes an aspect of the inner world. But what real appreciation do we have of these delightful descriptions? Do we have any idea what he is trying to explain? We interpret these according to our own very limited understanding and perception. We try to wrap the ephemeral in mental images, and then we treasure these images as if they were reality.

We are given descriptions of inner regions bathed in beauty: brilliant suns, moons, and stars – whatever the mind can conjure up and language can explain – but of what use are our fabricated images without actual experience?

In the translator’s notes in *Sar Bachan Poetry* we read:

Soami Ji is pragmatic. He knows that we don’t know who the Master is or what our real home is like. He teaches over and over that we should go on

with meditation, seva and satsang. These are the things that will enable us to experience reality for ourselves.

Every successful journey requires preparation, and here Soami Ji gives us the real foundation of our spiritual journey: seva, satsang, simran, and bhajan – under the guidance of our Master.

Soami Ji suggests seva as an essential part of our spiritual development. Real seva is our effort to bring our attention back to the eye centre and connect it to the Shabd. All other seva is simply a means to that end.

Great Master tells us that any kind of service done for the Master enriches us. He says in *My Submission*:

Sincere and selfless service done for the guru opens the channels of spiritual communion between the disciple and the Master.

The next piece of advice Soami Ji gives us for the preparation of our journey is attending satsang. However, in *Sar Bachan Prose* he qualifies this, saying:

Satsang is really association with the Sat Guru.

For most of us this is theoretical, and satsang refers to the outer activity of attending a talk on various aspects of the path. Focusing on what is being said will frequently clear our misconceptions and give us a better understanding of the teachings, but the greatest benefit of attending satsang is when we are inspired to be more devoted to our meditation practice. Buffeted by a world that entices and delights us, we are constantly drawn into the domain of materialism. Satsang draws our attention back to meditation and the importance of our journey.

Both seva and satsang keep us focused on what we should be doing spiritually, which is our simran and bhajan. Simran is the powerful and effective means we use to achieve inner stillness, peace, and equilibrium, without which we cannot embark on this journey. Silently repeating our simran calms the mind, which simultaneously results in subduing the ego – the veil that stands between us and our Master. We all have the opportunity of moving that veil aside by attending to our meditation, which will lead us to the Shabd.

In *Spiritual Heritage* Maharaj Charan Singh highlights the importance of Shabd:

You see, the basis of all spirituality is Shabd. ... If you remove that from the teachings, nothing is left.

Our incredible journey is just that – incredible, because it is a journey into Shabd. Hazur Maharaj Ji tells us:

This sound not only leads us but actually takes us back to the Father. First we follow it; then as we make internal progress, we merge into it and ride or ascend to our home by means of the Sound, the Word. It is constantly pulling us inside like a magnet and attracting us homeward.

Light on Saint John

Through the grace and help of the Master, the Shabd draws us from within. All we can do is make ourselves receptive to its pull and enjoy the ride.

Despite its limitations, language is the only way the Masters can explain their teachings to us. Their beautiful descriptions – the containers they use – serve to entice us to continue with our spiritual practices. However, we need to stop admiring the beautiful containers and drink the water of spirituality they hold.

But how thirsty are we? When we become disillusioned with our meditation we may use negative containers such as ‘can’t,’ ‘hard,’ and ‘difficult,’ to describe our practice, and then, disillusioned, we turn to the world to try and satisfy our thirst. But we must persevere with our meditation, because we have embarked on an incredible journey – an experience that lies beyond the ordinary range of perception. Only meditation will open our inner eye to that experience – our incredible homeward journey.



A Homily on Happiness

You may have defects, be anxious and sometimes irritated, but do not forget that your life is the greatest enterprise in the world.

Being happy is not having a sky without storms, nor relationships without disappointments. Being happy is to recognize that it is worthwhile to live, despite all the challenges and times of crises.

Being happy is not inevitable fate but a victory for those who strive towards it. Being happy is to stop being a victim of problems and becoming an actor in history itself. It is not only to cross the deserts outside of ourselves, but even more, to find an oasis in the recesses of our soul. It is to thank God every morning for the miracle of life.

Being happy means allowing the free, happy and simple child inside us to live; having the maturity to say, 'I was wrong'; having the audacity to say, 'forgive me'. It is to have sensitivity in expressing 'I need you,' to be able to say 'I love you.'

Thus your life becomes a garden full of opportunities for being happy...

In your springtime may you become a lover of joy. In your winter may you become a friend of wisdom. And if you go wrong along the way, you just start all over again. Thus you will be more passionate about life.

And you will find that happiness is not about having a perfect life but about using tears to water tolerance, losses to refine patience, failures to carve serenity and obstacles to open the windows of intelligence.

Never give up. Never give up on the people you love. Never give up being happy because life is an incredible show, and you are a special human being!

Pope Francis



BOOK REVIEW

Switch on Your Brain

BY DR. CAROLINE LEAF

PUBLISHER: GRAND RAPIDS, MI: BAKER BOOKS, 2013.

ISBN 978-0-8010-1839-8

In this book the author presents a systematic approach to training the mind, grounded in wisdom from the Bible and insights from modern neuroscience. Whether we are trying to shift from habitual worrying to trusting in the Lord, or from a pattern of complaining and unresolved anger to one of gratitude and forgiveness, or from endless mental chatter to remembrance of the Divine. In all cases we first have to overcome an entrenched habit which may be only partially conscious. The author assures us that we can choose to change. She quotes the Bible: 'God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.' (2 *Tim* 1:7)

She explains in some detail the physical effects that take place in the brain in response to thoughts, showing how repeated patterns of thought create pathways in the physical structures of the brain. Essentially, the brain becomes wired to make the continued recycling of those same patterns of thought almost automatic or inevitable. The word 'almost' is key. As the author repeats several times, 'You are not a victim of your biology.' As she puts it, a predisposition is not a destiny. If we have wired those patterns in, we can also wire them out.

She asserts that we do have free will. We 'cannot control the events and circumstances of our lives, but we can control our reactions. Don't be reactive; take time to slow down and think.' As humans, we have the power to choose how we respond. This power of choice with which God has endowed human beings is, she says, 'the most powerful thing in the universe after God.' She quotes the Bible: 'Today I have given you the choice between life and death, between blessings and curses. Now I call upon heaven and earth to witness the choices you make.' (*Deut* 30:19)

She discusses neuroplasticity, the scientific finding that the physical structures in the brain are continually changing in response to our thoughts and our reactions to our experiences. She says that when we train our minds

– such as by turning our thoughts toward remembrance of the Lord and the desire to please him, or by inculcating contentment, gratitude, trust, or other positive responses – we are essentially doing our own brain surgery. She quotes the biblical advice: ‘Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.’ (*Rom 12:2*) As she explains, ‘We are designed ... to rewire our brains by thinking and by choosing to renew our minds.’

How do we do this? The Bible gives the challenging instruction ‘to take every thought captive to obey Christ.’ (*2 Cor 10:5*)

The ability to quiet your mind, focus your attention on the present issue, capture your thoughts, and dismiss the distractions that come in your way is an excellent and powerful ability that God has placed within you. In this busy age we live in, however, we have trained ourselves out of this natural and necessary skill.

It is necessary, daily, to ‘enter into directed rest,’ as she describes a meditative state of mind. Even taking time daily to calm the mind and engage in ‘deep intellectual thought’ helps us ‘to be aware of predispositions, evaluate them and choose to eliminate them.’

She calls multitasking one of the ‘plagues of modern existence.’ It is a kind of ‘hurry sickness.’ When we are multitasking, we shift our attention rapidly from task to task and, as the author says, ‘we can become shallow.’ The quality of our attention decreases, and this ‘opens us up to shallow and weak judgments and results in passive mindlessness.’ The opposite of multitasking is ‘deep, focused, intellectual attention.’ To maintain this focus, ‘we need to make a choice to be alert, practising the presence of God by sharpening our conscience and listening to our intuition.’ In such a state of attention, we will easily build a positive atmosphere around us by following the Bible’s advice: ‘Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.’ (*Phil 4:8*)

The thought activity that spins so rapidly and so uncontrollably from the ‘nonconscious metacognitive’ level of the mind is highly repetitive. For example, the same memory appears again and again, triggering the same thoughts and feelings over and over. How did these thought patterns

become established? Through many, many repetitions. Therefore, the only way to establish a different, more positive pattern of thought is through many, many repetitions. ‘The new, healthy thought is like a ‘tiny new plant’ that will need nurturing to grow,’ and the way to nurture it is by repeating it. It is all too easy to revert to long-established and familiar but toxic thought.

It is at the moment when a thought or memory comes into the conscious mind – that is, when the frontal lobe of the brain is firing – that the thought or memory becomes ‘weakened, vulnerable, malleable, and able to be manipulated.’ If at that moment we choose to replace that thought with a positive alternative, such as gratitude, forgiveness, or loving remembrance of the Lord, the entrenched pattern is weakened. If instead we entertain the thought, we reinforce it.

The results of rigorously practising the repetition of a new positive thought can be seen in brain imaging. As a thought is repeated, it looks at first like a tiny spine, growing to a bump, then a lollipop shape, then a mushroom. With enough repetition, the brain imaging starts to look like ‘lots more tree branches that are thick and well-established, with many branches interconnecting with other thought networks.’ At this point ‘that particular way of thinking or reacting embedded in the new thought tree has become an automatic part of you; you do it driven by the nonconscious mind, not the conscious mind.’

The author recommends a daily practice to create a “deliberate, disciplined and rigorous renewing of the mind lifestyle.’ This daily practice begins with a few minutes of quieting the mind and entering ‘directed rest,’ which allows us to reflect deeply on the positive thought pattern we want to establish. She recommends repeating the new, healthy thought at least seven times each day. She also recommends taking just one or two minutes to write our reflections, and then to read over what we have written. The writing and reading activate different parts of the brain and help to anchor the new learning you are trying to establish.

But the author also warns that simply repeating a thought that we don’t also feel to be true only creates cognitive dissonance, a state in which we are divided against ourselves. Instead, she recommends taking a moment to think clearly whenever a long-established negative thought or memory comes up. Ask yourself: Do I want this thought or memory to become part of who I am?

She says that if we give deep focused attention to this question, we will feel the truth of the positive, healthy choice.

Finally, the author recommends that we do more than merely cultivate new thoughts. She recommends that we commit to some definite action. She calls this the ‘active reach,’ because if we are to change entrenched patterns we have to stretch our abilities. For example, say we are trying to develop a habit of forgiving:

An active reach is not just the decision to forgive; it is the actual forgiving. ... It is not just the decision to stop dwelling on the past; it is the actual stopping of the dwelling on the past. It is not just the decision to not talk negatively; it is the actual not talking negatively no matter how tempting it is to do so. This is when you reach beyond where you are.

According to neuroscience, action helps anchor the new learning in the brain. The author ties this to the biblical verse ‘Faith without works is dead.’ (James 2:26)

To change our whole mindset and way of being may sound daunting, but the author insists it is possible. In fact, it is our birthright as humans. As Christ said, ‘Be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.’ (Matt 5:48) The author finds ample evidence in scripture and in science that we are designed to be healthy, intelligent, and happy. We were originally wired for love, not fear. Only our wrong choices have led us away from this norm. The author points out, ‘Because we are made in God’s image (Gen 1:26) and have ‘the mind of Christ’ (1 Cor 2:16), our normal state is one of perfection.’

