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Spiritual Link

Science of the Soul Research Centre

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Spiritual Link

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Divine Grace

Only those who reach their True Home obtain everlasting joy and peace. They break out of the cycle of birth and death forever and return at last to the Father, thereby escaping the repeated tortures of the messengers of death.

With whose grace do we gain admission to the court of the Lord? Surely not by our own efforts. Alone, we can do nothing. We can never, by ourselves, traverse the uncharted terrain of the inner path. We owe everything to the immeasurable grace of the Master. He showers his blessings on us by joining us with the Shabd and Nam, removing all our doubts, and pulling us out of this quagmire of illusion. It is our Master who puts us on the right path and awakens in our mind abiding love and devotion for the Lord. Blessed with his infinite grace, through meditation, we seek the door, find it, and we knock.

All beings in the world are helpless puppets in the hands of destiny. There is nothing they can accomplish by their own efforts. Those on whom the Lord wishes to shower his mercy and grace are given the gift of the human form. Out of those fortunate souls, he draws the attention of the marked ones to himself. These are the souls whom he, in his supreme bounty, wishes to deliver from doubt and delusion, whom he wishes to call back to his mansion by joining them with the Light and Sound.

Not till he himself showers his blessings are we put on this path. Not till he himself wants to lift us out of the mire of doubts are our minds made pure and clean. Not till he himself takes us into his fold are we redeemed through the Master's grace.

Maharaj Charan Singh, *Die to Live*



Appointment of a Lifetime

A beautiful summary of this human birth was given by the Master two years ago in Spain. A lady argued that her mind wasn't ready for meditation and perhaps she needed some special classes or more preparation before meditating. The Master replied that the minute we were given a human birth we were also given the capacity to be one with God. Once we have initiation we have the means to achieve that oneness. She countered that perhaps some children just had weaker minds and were not capable of meditating. The Master smiled and said, no, the Lord doesn't choose those children! His message was clear. We can walk this path. We can do the meditation.

It is said that the distance between God and us isn't measured in miles, it is measured by our desires. So where do our desires lie? Where does our attention lie? What desire do we most display to the Lord through our thoughts, our words, and our actions? Most of us say we want God. After all, that's why we're on a spiritual path, isn't it? We are constantly asked whether our desire to know God is reflected in our behaviour, in what we think about, and in how we spend our time.

If someone wants to become a famous piano player but never sits before a piano to practice, how successful will he be? Will it be the lofty goals or the actions that will lead to the desired outcome? Similarly, the action we must take for our spiritual awakening is to follow the four vows of initiation. The first three vows all say that we should be a good human being. The fourth instructs us to do our bhajan and simran.

Let's peep in the mirror of our own hearts. How do we behave as human beings? Are we judgmental or are we kind? When faced with negativity, do we walk away and ignore it, or do we like to join

in and feed that energy? Do we gossip about or mock someone who is not present? It has been said, “The slanderer washes my clothes” – meaning that if we criticize anyone, we may help clear their karmas, not ours. Do we really have that luxury?

Most of us struggle with the four vows at some time or another. But Master tells us not to analyze and instead to just always do our best – because this path doesn’t work when we put in half-hearted attempts. He asks us to be good people and to try our best at meditation, the fourth vow. Over time and with constant meditation, saints say we become more like the Lord through our extended association with the Shabd – kind, forgiving, and patient. This alchemy takes place through our connection, not with the world, but with the Word.

Just as an ordinary lump of clay turns into a beautiful bowl with its association with a potter, our constant association with the perfect mystic inspires us to be better people, to face and remove our faults, and to try and repeat our simran during the day so that we can improve the quality of our daily meditation.

Someone asked the Master what the minimum daily requirement for simran is, and he said: “24 hours”. So the more we think of the Lord, the more we will be in his company, and the more focus we will have to cross that threshold and enter the inner worlds. But all this can happen only when we start focusing our attention on the Master – all the time.

Omar Khayyam is quoted in *Caravan of Dreams* as saying:

*Read what you should read. See what you should see.
Act as you should act. Feel what you should feel.
Until you can do all these things, follow the Guide.
When you can do these things, you will not have
to be told – Follow the Guide.*

Idries Shah, *Caravan of Dreams*

He is saying that until we become perfect, we should simply follow the Guru. But once we reach perfection, we will realize there is no way other than to follow the Guru. We may waver in our faith because we haven't realized who the Master is. Yes, we feel like we belong with him in his physical company. We feel loved, special, and safe. But then, when we are far away, that closeness, that warmth and security may start to slip away. We get lost in our duties, television, and work. Months later we wonder where our motivation has gone. Saints say this happens because although we may understand conceptually that he is always with us, we haven't experienced it. Once we experience his constant presence, our attention will be with him all the time as we discharge our worldly duties.

What about the fourth vow? Is it two and one-half hours of meditation or two and one half hours of thinking? First is the time requirement. Just as we must show a certain attendance in college to be able to get enough credits to graduate, in the same way, we must show up, every day, for this appointment with our Master.

Then once we show up, what do we do? Usually we settle down, start simran, and the mind starts to wander back to that last argument with the spouse or boss, or how much our back hurts, and before we know it an hour has gone by with just those three rounds of simran! If we're going to carry the baggage of the entire world into our meditation, then that meditation is of the world.

Let's say we go to a gym to get healthy. We may go every day, talk to some friends, look at the charts on the wall, and watch the trainers teach other people, but we ourselves don't get on one single machine! And then we look at our watch and say, "Oh, time to go, great workout today." We aren't going to get fit unless we actually work out ourselves!

In the same way we have to make our meditation count. We have to put in effort to still the mind, one thought at a time, in order to reverse this flow of attention, so we can allow the soul to regain its strength. And this can only happen through focused meditation. We need to become absorbed in that simran, which will help lead us to the Shabd that is constantly ringing within us, pointing the way home – no matter how feeble the Shabd may initially be.

We often hear, “Anything worth doing, is worth doing well.” A Zen Master writes: “Find your posture and then sit – as if it’s the last act of this lifetime.”

We should sit as if our being depends on this meditation session, for indeed it does. We should sit as if it is our topmost priority, for indeed it is. As Maharaj Sawan Singh writes, “This done, all is done: this not done, all else is as if nothing has been done.”

He’s telling us that this is the appointment of a lifetime. This is the most important thing we will ever do. There’s no ‘to do’ list beyond this. There is no place to go afterwards, no people to meet – just our being fully present with him. It’s as if we are sitting with the physical form of the Master during a long interview. In those moments, do we have a care in the world? No one else exists. No worry burdens our heart; no task presses upon us. We are wholly there, entirely present, absorbing every second of his beauty.

Similarly, while meditating, we let our soul be in the presence of its creator. Eyes closed, ears closed, thoughts closed – just soul and spirit, disciple and Master. The soul is the disciple; the Shabd is the Guru.

Being immersed in the current of God, there’s no way, say the saints, that we will not be dyed in the colour of the Lord. Talking about this promise, Sultan Bahu says:

*When I went within myself to investigate,
I found my Beloved sitting alone – waiting!*

The Master is in charge of this game of grace. His grace first flowed when we received a human birth. More grace was showered upon us when we were drawn to the spiritual path, and boundless grace poured forth when he initiated us. The key to our awareness of the grace of the Master is our meditation.

So God is there, waiting at the eye centre. It is we who are missing. Let's give him our best. Let's dedicate ourselves to him each time we meditate, for this truly is an appointment of a lifetime.



*One day, this self, and all dear to it,
will be blown around in dust and dirt.
While you still have a chance, offer all you have here,
at this purifying flame, and be cleansed.
Garments torn, heart on fire,
let your whole being burn away in this Love.*

Shaikh Abu-Saeed Abil-Kheir, *Nobody, Son of Nobody*,
rendition by Vraje Abramian



Devotion

*Dedicate your life to ardent devotion to God,
and your endeavours will bring you peace.
Attain union with God
through contemplation on his Name.*

Jap Ji: A Perspective

Devotion involves contemplating or thinking with single-pointed consciousness about what we are dedicated to.

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

Devotion to the Lord is a strong magnetic power by which the attention is removed from worldly objects and becomes fully concentrated in the Lord. There is thus no interference by one's intellect or power of reasoning. Devotion is the act of withdrawing our attachment from all directions and fixing it only in the Lord.

Consequently, our full and complete attention is required in order to have ardent devotion. Not half-focused, wandering attention, but honest to God, laser-beam focus.

People often remark that when Baba Ji is talking to someone, his full attention remains fixed on them as if no one else exists in the world. Hafiz, a fourteenth-century Sufi mystic, explains this beautifully in *The Gift*, when he writes: “Everyone is God speaking. Why not be polite and listen to Him?” Attention has the power to attract the object of our devotion. When the Master looks at us, we cannot help but look back at him.

The same thing can happen when we pass someone on the street and we smile unexpectedly; they light up and give us a big smile in return. A simple smile can make someone's day.

We are reminded that when we give our devotion to the world, we become miserable. Mostly we give our consciousness over to things and fruitless ideas that do not reflect the light of love back to us. We are challenged to consider that our consciousness illuminates what we think about, but what we think about does not always illuminate our eyes. So Hafiz makes this point saying:

*On this primal caravan
Careers and cities can appear real in this
Intense
Desert heat,
But I say to my close ones,*

*“Don't get lost in them,
It has not rained light there for days.*

*Look, most everyone is diseased
From 'making love' to
Nothing.”*

The Gift, as rendered by Daniel Ladinsky

Saints warn us not to become engrossed in contemplating things and possessions, so as not to create a bond of love – attachment – for the world. Since we create a relationship of love with whatever we give our attention to, we must make God the object of our devotion.

Hafiz provides the method of how we can obtain divine love:

*For God
To make love,
For the divine alchemy to work,
The Pitcher [the Master] needs a still cup.*

The Gift

The current of love, Shabd, will fill us only after our attention becomes still and focused. Stillness comes when we place our full attention on simran, the repetition of the Names, during our daily meditation. And in that stillness, when our attention is completely absorbed in the current of love, we merge into that current. It is a process of letting go of the self.

Great Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh, quotes Shams-e-Tabrizi, who says:

Give up pride and become like dust, as from dust springs green grass. If you become ash because of divine FIRE, then this ash will act as alchemy which would turn your iron into gold.

Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. III

When we turn our attention away from the entanglements of thought and become ash in the 'divine fire', our eyes shine with the light and jubilation of love. The path of love is the path of the Name, the Logos, the Word, the Shabd. Hafiz continues:

*The only life raft here is love
And the Name.
Say it brother,
O, say the divine Name, dear sister,
Silently as you walk.*

*Don't die again
With that holy ruby mine inside
Still unclaimed.*

The Gift

Great Master says in *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. II*:

The object of love is to lose oneself in the identity of the beloved.... No thought of any kind should be allowed to enter between the devotee and the object of his devotion.

He says in the same volume:

Devotion is not a subject for reasoning or even for thinking. It is an intuitive emotion of love.... Devotion consists in fixing the form of the Master in our heart.... Then love is awakened in the heart of the disciple.

Devotion has a strong magnetic pull. God gave us attention on loan, and now he wants it back. When our attention becomes completely absorbed in the Name through our devotion – our constant remembrance, our never-ending simran, our meditation – we will merge into the ocean of love.



Divine Knowledge

*Let divine knowledge be your food,
compassion your steward,
and the divine music
that resounds in every heart be your horn, O yogi!*

*Let God himself be your master,
as the entire universe hinges on his will.
The pursuit of miraculous powers
provides only illusory satisfaction.
Both union and separation
serve to regulate the affairs of the world,
and all receive what destiny has set apart for them.*

*My obeisance is to the One,
the primal, the pure,
without beginning, without end,
one and the same, all through the ages.*

Jap Ji: A Perspective



The Broken Heart

My dilemma is that after spending half my life following the path of Sant Mat, I do not think that I am anywhere close to being the still, focused, and peaceful disciple I once thought I would be. A Sufi poet, Shaikh Abu-Saeed Abil-Kheir in *Nobody, Son of Nobody*, asks this central question in a poem that perfectly sums up our plight:

*One moment, You are all I know, Friend.
Next moment, eat, drink and be merry!
Another moment, I put every beast to shame.
O' Friend, how will this scatteredness that is me
find its way to You?*

The poets understand the human condition. Perhaps the question Abil-Kheir asks is on behalf of everyone who has not yet realized the true form of the Master within. There have been moments, most often felt when I am in the presence of my Master, where I do say, yes, you are my ultimate friend, the one I want to give all my time and attention to. But then, as the poets note, the next moment I am out frolicking in the creation, pursuing the sense pleasures, seeking to delight my taste buds with a savory new dessert or entice my mind with the latest high-tech distraction, and wondering why the world isn't providing me with more happiness and satisfaction.

That question has also been asked by others. Sarmad, a seventeenth-century saint, observes the same dilemma when he writes:

*And this heart is so unsteady –
Sometimes it pines for the world,*

sometimes for the world beyond....

*I am drowning in the sea of shame and regret.
My only wish is that even for one breath
I may not forget You,
but alas! with every breath I am negligent.*

Sarmad: Martyr to Love Divine

Sarmad, speaking on behalf of every struggling soul, says he would like to focus upon God with even one breath. I, too, try to focus my attention, try to listen for advice in satsang about how to have a more disciplined life and better attitude, and to discover new ways to trick my mind into doing more simran. And the results are not very impressive. So this question is haunting – how will this “scatteredness that is me” ever find its way to God?

Someone asked the Master a very simple and direct question. She asked something like: “What is it that we are supposed to be doing in meditation? Should we be focusing our attention, disciplining the mind, and working hard? Or should we be letting go and surrendering?” In reply the Master suggested that, since we can’t focus, the only thing we can do *is* to let go.

Now one might conclude that this was an individual answer for a particular person – a poor soul who couldn’t concentrate no matter how hard she tried. But I am no different than she is. I can’t focus. I remain scattered. And this prolonged separation from God is heart-breaking, challenging, and bewildering.

Hafez, a fourteenth-century Persian mystic and poet, maintains that all sorrow, pain, and dissatisfaction is a gift from God. He tells the struggling disciple in *The Poems of Hafez*, “the hut [house] of sorrow turns to a rose garden – do not grieve.” He does not suggest

that we consult a doctor to see if our broken heart can be mended.
He writes:

*Better my pain hidden from the counterfeit healers;...
The wise will understand the story of a broken heart.*

The Poems of Hafez

A great treasure lies in the story of the broken heart. Outside our heart is where we experience our separation from God, the anguish of our scatteredness and distraction, and our inability to find our own way, but inside is where we find the “medicine” for our broken hearts. We need to trust that in this place, our Master will find us.

Hafez continues in the same volume:

*The Eternal King gifted us the treasure of the sorrows of love
ever since we arrived at this tattered mansion of woes....
only sinners find their way to the monastery.*

The sinners, those of us who fall short of our ideals, we who know sorrow and anguish, are the ones who cry out for help. As Hazur says in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*:

*The longing within us to go back to the Father, the tears we shed
in separation ultimately will lead us back to the Father.... What
else can the child do ... who has lost his Father, except cry?*

We might have assumed that our sins and our sorrows are terrible obstacles between ourselves and the Lord. We don't yet know that there are no barriers to the power of love. Nothing in us, or around us, or any shortcomings of our heart or mind, can prevent our divine Master from taking us into his arms.

The Masters know just how foolish we are. But still they tell us that the disciple cannot disappoint his Master. They see our foolishness, our scatteredness, and with the power of God's love, what was rigid thaws, and what was heavy becomes light. With their love, a breath of joy, a breath of gentleness sweeps over us. This love reaches us and tells us that all of us who fall short of the mark are forgiven. Our Father is coming to find us, to take us home. Our cries and anguish over our separation from our Beloved is only a sign of his grace.

Sarmad puts it beautifully in the following poem from *Sarmad: Martyr to Love Divine*:

*My feet have worn these chains for a lifetime.
But even if I'm imprisoned by countless sins,
I have hope for a thousand salvations
in a single act of his grace.*

Ultimately, we may discover that the house of sorrow is a blessing. God's grace is the cornerstone of everything. Maharaj Charan Singh in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*, says:

His grace is what pulls you back to him, and that may be a very bitter pill.... His grace is what attaches you to him.

The Master has promised he will bring us into God's kingdom of perfect love. And that is exactly how our scatteredness will someday become focused and he will bring us home.



Being Good Human Beings

The Masters implore us to be good human beings. Surprisingly, we do not hear many questions about what constitutes the qualities of a good human being. Maybe we already think we know. If we are attempting to follow the vows we took at initiation, we probably think of ourselves as good human beings. But is just following the vows enough to automatically qualify us for that distinction?

We are vegetarians, which is good for our karmic account because we are not involved in the cruelty of taking life to satisfy our taste buds, but that alone does not make us good human beings. Since using drugs or dulling the mind with alcohol sabotages all attempts to raise our consciousness and concentration, it is essential to abstain from both. But again, that is not an automatic badge of goodness, any more than claiming that anyone using either is a bad human being.

Perhaps we can convince ourselves that by practicing the third vow we have arrived at some degree of goodness. After all, it deals specifically with morality, honesty, celibacy outside of marriage, and being law-abiding citizens. We would be wrong to assume that these are all we need to become good human beings.

Maybe we believe that meditation alone makes us good human beings. If anything, the practice of meditation is like putting a gigantic magnifying glass over ourselves that allows us to clearly see all our flaws.

Living the life of an initiate does not immediately transform us into good human beings, yet that is what the Master suggests that we strive to become. At the very least we can take a personal inventory and identify characteristics of a good human that we might want to develop.

What are the characteristics of a good human being, at least by worldly standards? Genuinely good people are good role models. They strive to do the right thing because that is the core of who they are. At the same time, they can recognize room for growth and take responsibility for their mistakes and make amends where necessary. They draw others in by radiating authenticity.

Having a living Master helps us by providing us with a role model, a living example of a balanced, good human being. Watching him, listening to him, and observing how he conducts himself, how he answers our endless questions, reveals to us the real nature of his kindness and compassion. The letters and discourses of all the Masters are filled with practical advice and examples of good behaviour befitting a seeker of truth. In fact, simple advice on what it means to be human appears throughout the literature of Sant Mat. We are all familiar with these precepts. Perhaps the Masters repeatedly bring them to our attention to encourage us to move beyond familiarity and lip-service and actually practice them. Conscious behavior is what helps distinguish us from the lower species.

If one had to sum up all the positive human qualities in one word, that word might be character. Great Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh writes in *Spiritual Gems*:

Character is the foundation upon which rises the spiritual edifice. As long as one is a slave to the senses, talk of spirituality is a mockery.... The first essential step to a spiritual life is character.

Note how he contrasts character and living a spiritual life with enslavement to the senses. One truly becomes a satsangi when one has risen above the senses. Think about what that means. How might

it feel to rise above our passions and the stimulations of the senses? Imagine being unaffected by emotions, unconcerned with cravings, uninfluenced by others' opinions. Would it feel calm, peaceful, steady, and serene? That's what we can look forward to when we truly begin living as spiritual beings.

Maharaj Jagat Singh says in *The Science of the Soul*:

*One does not become a satsangi simply by being initiated...
A satsangi's daily conduct must bear the hallmark of excellence.*

Philosophers and saints agree that the human experience is distinguished by the ability to discriminate: between what is good and what is better, between the true and the false, between the useful and the useless. We need to use that ability to choose what is in the best interest of our soul and our spiritual life.

Sometimes in our society a high moral character is seen as the end rather than the means to an end. Often when this happens people are inclined to 'act' to put on a show of character. After all it's relatively easy to act virtuous: volunteer for a good cause, contribute to charities, perform good deeds, or say the right thing. It is also relatively easy to *act* like a satsangi: attend satsang, give satsang, do seva, talk about the Master, take trips to the Dera. It's another thing entirely to be of high moral character and be a satsangi. As Maharaj Sawan Singh observes:

*One may deceive one's friends, relatives and even oneself, but
the Power within is never deceived.*

Spiritual Gems

This path is rather humbling. The Masters suggest there is really nothing for us to be proud of. We sometimes dislike ourselves for

what we call our human nature, but then we turn around and justify our weaknesses as human nature. If we lose our temper or fly off the handle, we are only human. If we are inconsiderate or self-obsessed, it is only human nature. We blame all our faults on human nature. Instead, the Master says, we must strive to become better human beings and build those positive characteristics that will keep us in balance. It is not through our negative qualities that we are distinguished from the lower forms of life; it is because we have the potential to develop positive qualities. We were given this human form for God-realization, and it is through development of our character that our humanness can be measured.

It's rather amazing how the meaning of the vows becomes deeper as we journey along this path. At first we tend to think of them as a few specific things: a special diet, clean living, being honest, celibate if not married, and meditation. But as the years go by, we see how each vow affects every area of our lives. And that's how it should be.

To live these teachings means becoming a human being of good character. While living according to the vows we take at initiation is necessary, it is not sufficient. We must go one step further and internalize these vows and do our meditation. To become a good human being we must take continual inventory of ourselves, make the necessary adjustments and rise courageously to the challenge of being a human being of character. This will also support our efforts in meditation.



Ego Limitations

In *The Illuminated Prayer* by Coleman Barks and Michael Green, there is a contemporary metaphor of the limitations for identifying with our egos:

The 'I' that so many have defended to their dying breath might be likened to a slightly unstable computer operating system. It's got wonderful features, but it still crashes and needs regular upgrades. Ultimately it is nothing more than a swarm of charged particles, or rather, it's only the pattern of charges, completely ephemeral, subject at any moment to error messages, erasure, viruses, random power surges ... even unfixable crashes. The Sufi's response to such a marginal existence is simple: abandon the assumption that this program is who we really are. Marvelous things can now happen. We might identify with wider horizons – like the hard drive, or the processor. Or the network, the World Wide Web, the wide world, or finally, the Great Sea of Being supporting everything.

This opening up of identity is the great work, and no effort in it is ever wasted.

What a great message of how marvelous things can happen once we abandon the notion that this 'I' is who we really are. A shift takes place away from the limited self toward the unlimited. We can gain this broad outlook only when we associate with something grander and mightier than us – like the path, like our Master.





Living the Spiritual Life

What is the secret to successfully living a spiritual life? When we examine ourselves, we usually do not measure up to our concept of a spiritual person. From our perceived shortcomings, we may fashion a litany of beliefs about spirituality that may actually impede the success of our spiritual practice.

One belief that we may hold is that to live a spiritual life we need more knowledge and experience. Books from both the Eastern and Western mystical traditions are rich with accounts of heaven and hell, reward and punishment, the nature of man's relationship to God, and the purpose of worldly suffering. Through our reading, we may learn to debate and ask appropriate questions about what we read, but we remain lost. Our frustration with attaining knowledge through reading books may lead us to turn toward our friends, religious scholars, teachers of philosophy, and perhaps even those who claim to have psychic abilities in order to seek more information and knowledge. While we may find agreement among the written and oral accounts of man's relationship to God and what awaits us after death, we still long for more than intellectual satisfaction – we want the certainty of our own experience. Where is such guidance to be found, if neither in books nor in the words of those trusted friends?

Great Master, Maharaj Sawan Singh writes in *Spiritual Gems*:

You need not accept anything that does not appeal to you in books or even in my letters. You may leave aside for the time being, the ultimate object of life and its how and why. You may start your enquiry from this end, and then take as your objective the attack upon the eye focus.

So here the Master is saying that whatever we think we need to know may not entirely serve us in our efforts to live a spiritual life. Scripture may not enlighten us; we will never truly understand with our intellect the how and why of this life. Even the Master's words may leave us confused. We are advised instead to begin our enquiry where we are. And where are we? Currently, we may be very much in this creation – leaking divine energy. In our mundane lives, we are making a living, doing our best to provide for ourselves and our families. In our intellectual lives, we are tricked into believing that the truth can be found in the realm of debate and that God can be understood through reading books and pilgrimages to holy places.

So the Master provides us with a living example of how to be in this world. He does many of the same things that we do: he eats, sleeps, works, and has a family. But he does one more thing all twenty-four hours of the day: he remains aware of the Shabd, whether he is tying his shoes or giving a discourse on the teachings.

So do we need more knowledge and experience of the world to traverse this path? The Master's words and, more importantly, his example suggest not.

Perhaps we think that to live the spiritual life we need more self-improvement to become better people. We certainly live in times in which we worship at the altar of self-improvement. We might think, if I could just become a better person, if I were more truthful, more caring, more directed, then I would be successful at the spiritual life. But as we travel through life, our roles continually change, we remain trapped in the same illusions. How many times have we attempted to conquer one vice only to find it replaced by another? We rise above anger, only to find ourselves consumed by greed. Is this why we practice meditation – to trade up on our vices? Great Master says simply in *Spiritual Gems*, “This life is for the purpose of ending

our coming back into this world.” These words are not a challenge to improve our personalities or to build our stamina, but rather a reminder that we have come here to say good-bye once and for all.

If self-improvement alone is not our mission, what about a loftier goal like purity of mind? Maharaj Charan Singh once suggested that it is “by meditation ... that we make our body pure, we make our mind pure and we make our soul pure” (*Spiritual Perspectives, Vol.I*). And that takes discipline. Discipline is more about staying on track, being focused, keeping our priorities in view; it is not only about being good or pure. In our spiritual work, being disciplined means that we organize our life, and each day, around our meditation practice. We make decisions about how much time we will spend in work, sleep, and play based upon the time and energy we need to bring to meditation.

The saints suggest that one of the first steps along the spiritual path is to see ourselves for who we are. Daily life provides us with many opportunities to see our limited self. But the goal is to go beyond the limited, worldly self to the realization of our true self. It is only when the soul gets released from the clutches of the mind that true self-realization occurs.

Maybe we believe that to live a spiritual life we need more time. How often we hear ourselves saying, “If only I had the time.” How much time do we need, and when will there ever be enough? Both the laws of physics and our own experience teach us that time is relative. When we’re in shock or unhappy, time stands still; whereas in joy and happiness, time flies by in an instant. So the mental state in which we approach our actions throughout the day can enhance or diminish our perception of the time available to us.

In *Spiritual Letters*, Baba Jaimal Singh says, “This bhajan is meant for those who are busy and not for the idle. It is not for those who

just sit and do nothing.” While our ultimate fantasy might be to sit and do nothing, it is ironic that when it comes to meditation time, we are unable to just sit and do nothing. We commit two and one half hours daily to a practice of meditation, which takes us beyond the boundaries of time. And if we can recall our simran periodically throughout the day, we will have brief respites from the trap of time. It is the tricky mind that leaves us trapped in the belief that there is truly not enough time. Properly integrated, daily living and our meditation reinforce one another, with meditation sustaining our spiritual needs, and proper rest and concentration supporting our worldly work.

If we don't need more time in the day, do we perhaps simply need more years on the path? In *Light on St. Matthew*, Maharaj Charan Singh explains Christ's words “the last shall be first and the first last”:

Some people come early and work the whole of their life for spiritual progress. Some people come quite late in their life, and they also work the remainder of their life for spiritual progress, but equal wages are paid to everybody, whoever is initiated.

So he suggests that the mercy of the Lord, not merely the time spent daily or throughout our lifetime, determines our success at concentration. How much longing for that mercy do we bring to our practice? How much desire? How much commitment?

This brings us to the notion that we need more love and faith to live a spiritual life. It's understandable, we might reason, that our actions in this world might be fraught with difficulty, but why would faith in the practice and the love of the Master, with whom we long to be, require struggle? We might sometimes conclude that we simply do not have sufficient love and faith. But our feelings of inadequacy are unwarranted. In *Quest for Light*, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

Do not for a moment feel that you are once again back to where you were fifteen or twenty years ago. Meditation once done can never be lost even though for some reason or other further progress is temporarily obstructed.

Hazur Maharaj Ji reminds us here that we cannot judge our success in living the spiritual life from where we sit. The shortcomings that define our humanness may travel with us throughout our life in spite of our best efforts to overcome them. Yet it is our litany of beliefs about spirituality that may be a greater barrier to our practice than our human flaws. We may not need more love and faith, more knowledge, more experience, or more time, and we may not need to be better people before we can lead a spiritual life. While each of these beliefs may help us live better lives, by themselves, they are not sufficient. What then do we need? The Masters tell us that the only thing we need more of is meditation, more practice, nothing else. Everything will come from this.



*It's as if Love's radiant oil
never stops searching for a lamp in which to burn.*

The Rumi Daybook, translated by K.& C.Helminski

Amazing Grace

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound,
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*

Most of us are probably familiar with these words as being the start of the hymn, “Amazing Grace”, written by John Newton in the eighteenth century. A Christian hymn, no doubt, but it could have been written by any follower of a spiritual path – the sound that saves us spiritual seekers, the Shabd, that power of God that is within everything in the creation, both physical and spiritual. That sound that transforms us from lost to found, blind to seeing – and it is the Lord’s grace that brings us in touch with that sound, the Shabd.

We are lost; we are blind. We don’t know who we truly are or where we come from until the Master comes and reminds us of our soul and its divine origin. We look at the creation with our physical eyes and do not know that there is an inner eye, referred to as the third eye, that will ultimately allow us to see who we really are. It is the Master who begins the process of opening our spiritual eye – making the blind see – through his grace. It is the Master who draws us to him, initiates us and teaches us how to meditate, and it is the Master who pulls us to do our meditation.

In *Die to Live*, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

Well, from a higher point of view it is all the Lord’s grace that we are attending to meditation. But here, at this level, we feel as though we are putting in the effort to achieve our object. He’s the

One who is pulling us from within. He's the One who is creating that desire in us to meditate. He's the One who is giving us that atmosphere and those circumstances and environments in which we can build our meditation.

Although we feel that we find the path and that we are changing our lifestyle to become more spiritually oriented, in fact, it is the Shabd, the Lord, and the spiritual form of the Master within us, that is creating all these changes.

Maharaj Charan Singh continues in the same answer:

So you can say, "I am doing the meditation," provided you are doing it. But when you really do it, then you won't say, "I am doing it." "I" only comes when we don't do it. When we truly meditate, then "I" just disappears. Then we realize his grace, that but for him how could we ever think or even attend to it. Then there is no "I", there is nothing but gratefulness – everything in gratitude.

"I", the ego, is what makes us believe that we are in control of what is happening in our lives. In reality, since our soul is part and parcel of the Lord, it is he who is doing everything. We are like holograms – we look real, but we are just an illusion; everyone around us thinks we are real too, but that is because they are also part of the illusion. It takes one who can see beyond the physical to the spiritual to realize the truth of who we are. That is the Master. He is trying to take us to that level where we can see the truth too. That is where our meditation comes in.

Maharaj Charan Singh says, again in *Die to Live*:

*We owe everything to the immeasurable grace of the Master.
He showers his blessings on us by joining us with the Shabd
and Nam, removing all our doubts, and pulling us out of this
quagmire of illusion. It is our Master who puts us on the right
path and awakens in our mind abiding love and devotion for
the Lord. Blessed with his infinite grace, through meditation, we
seek the door, we find it, and we knock.*

We seek the door – the eye centre. We knock, we do our simran. We listen to the sound, we see light, we become enlightened. We are saved.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.*



*You have scattered your awareness in all directions
and your vanities are not worth a bite of cabbage....
Direct the water of God's Bounty to spirit and insight,
not to the knotted and broken world outside.*

Rumi, as quoted in *The Rumi Daybook*,
translated by K. and C. Helminski

God Stands Alone in the Garden

On this balmy summer night
Jasmine mingles her euphoria
With mesmerizing music
Streaming from the starry inner sky.
Cicadas chronicle each moment
with delighted rhythmic calls.
Off in the distance
A bell chimes
Shining joy.

God stands alone in the garden
Waiting for his lover
Who has forgotten all about
The appointed hour
To meet again
In one another's eyes
And fly entwined
Far and high and wild
Spirit unto Spirit
Reveling in holy embrace
Then floating, buoyant
Into the brightest ecstasy
Of sacred starry Oneness.

God stands alone
In the Garden,
His refulgent face reflected

In a thousand shining leaves.
He smiles and shakes his head
Then walks away

While his forgetful lover
Lies in the arms of sleep
And dreams deep sorrow
And heartsick hope
For love.

Original poem by a satsangi



Longing for darshan is equal to meditation? But how can you have darshan without meditation? By darshan Baba Ji Maharaj meant that inner darshan of the Radiant Form of the Master.

But longing to be one with the Radiant Form of the Master you can't obtain without meditation. The purpose of physical darshan is to create longing for that inner darshan, and then meditation naturally takes us to that level of consciousness where we can see the Radiant Form of the Master. Then the purpose of darshan and meditation is achieved.

Maharaj Charan Singh, Die to Live

Welcoming Age

A satangi had a party for her seventy-fifth birthday last summer. Her children amassed a substantial group of family and friends who had known her at various times of her life. They gathered at a favourite park and shared stories from her past. There were pictures, her favourite music, and good vegetarian food for all. “It was great fun,” she reported happily, “like attending my own funeral!”

Death is a fact for all of us, aging for the lucky ones. For a satsangi, death has special meaning since we court it daily in our meditation. So, too, aging can acquire special meaning, as it becomes a living metaphor for letting go of the world.

Our Incredible Shrinking Universe

When we are young, everything is new. Each experience is a learning experience, and for the first half of our lives our universe of experience expands. Stuff happens. We marry – or not. We have children that become our joy and the bane of our existence. We engage, we join, we develop, we make progress, we accumulate – oh, how we accumulate. We are persuaded to save the tigers, rainforest, whales, historic sites, trees, to vote for the candidate of change, and to sign up for any cause that will ‘make a difference’.

Somewhere past middle age a sense of ‘been there, done that’ settles in. Eventually it becomes clear: nothing we do in this world really changes it; nothing we do really makes much difference. We can’t wait to see how it all turns out, until we realize it never really turns out. It only goes on. Our sphere of interest gets smaller. Soon, leaving our comfortable home for yet another festival, rally, or cruise hardly seems worth the effort. One morning we look in the mirror

and see a vaguely familiar but shockingly gray and wrinkled visage looking back. What happened? Life happened. Age silently crept in and has taken over our lives.

Somewhere along the way Master calls us, and we rearrange our lives to accommodate what becomes our guiding light. Multi-tasking is replaced by the quest for seeking one-pointed attention. Engagement is abandoned in the search for silence and simplicity.

Over time our meditation waxes and wanes with the mind battling all the usual suspects. But the battle of age is less likely to be with raging passions and more likely to be with aching backs and leg cramps. What about the slave drivers, the senses? Age affects them too. Eyes dim with cataracts; hearing softens. With time the most enticing sensual pleasures begin to fade and reveal themselves to be toothless and flavourless and more easily tamed by a mature and disciplined mind.

By the time age and wisdom arrive, we have learned to sort out what is important and what isn't. And this path certainly helps with that task. The excitement of constantly new stimulation has been replaced by a new appreciation of peace, quiet, and contemplation.

Carrot or Coffee?

This parable points out the nature of our human condition:

A grown daughter came to her mother in distress over the vicissitudes of life. After some comforting discussion, the mother took her to the kitchen and set three small pots of water on the stove to boil. In the first she placed carrots, in the second she placed eggs (I guess they weren't satsangis), and in the last she placed ground coffee beans. In about twenty minutes she turned off the burners and served the contents up in three bowls. Turning to her daughter, she said, "Tell me what you see." "Carrots, eggs, and coffee," the daughter replied. Her

mother brought her closer and asked her to feel the carrots. She did and noted that they were soft. The mother then asked the daughter to take an egg and break it. After removing the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg.

Finally, the mother asked the daughter to sip the coffee. The daughter smiled, as she tasted its rich aroma.

Then the mother explained that each of these objects had faced the same adversity: boiling water. Each reacted differently.

The carrots went in strong, hard, and unrelenting. However, after being subjected to the boiling water, they softened and became weak. The eggs had been fragile. Their thin outer shell had protected the liquid interior, but after sitting in the boiling water, the insides became hardened.

The ground coffee beans were unique, however. As they were in the boiling water, they changed the water.

“Which are you?” she asked her daughter. “When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a carrot, an egg, or a coffee bean?”

Are we the carrot that seems strong, but with pain and adversity do we wilt and become soft and lose our strength? Are we the egg that starts with a malleable heart, but solidifies with the heat? Did we have a fluid spirit, but after a death, a breakup, a financial hardship or some other trial, have we become hardened and stiff? Does our outer shell look the same, but on the inside are we bitter and tough with a stiff spirit and hardened heart?

Or are we like the coffee bean? The bean actually changes the hot water, the very circumstance that brings the pain. When the water gets hot, it releases the fragrance and flavour. If we are like the bean, when things are at their worst, we get better and change the situation around

us. When the hour is the darkest and trials are their greatest, do we elevate ourselves to another level?

Satsangis will understand this parable as karmic debt playing out. With an attitude of gratitude we will remain firm and resolute. In practicing forgiveness we will remain resilient. With acceptance of Master's will, we will enjoy the coffee.

In *Living Meditation* the discussion turns to a similar theme of attitude and altitude:

Attitude is the point of view we apply to life. There is a connection between attitude and altitude. The higher our point of view or perspective, the more detached we become, and the better equipped we are to do our meditation. Meditation helps our attitude by giving us the altitude or cosmic perspective to see the big dramas of life as small or insignificant, rather than as gigantic, unsolvable problems.

It's Not the End of the World, But –

When we cross the invisible line that defines us as “old” we begin inevitably to think more about the end of this game of life. What begins as simple downsizing becomes a pledge to “get our affairs in order”. The traditional sitting position of meditation becomes more difficult, but there is more time for simran, and simran comes easier. Another satsangi friend, now in her late eighties, is confined to a wheelchair, her hearing pretty much gone, her eyesight fading. “It’s perfect,” she says of her situation. “I spend most of my days looking out the window watching the light change on the tree in the front yard, doing simran.” We wonder, now and then, exactly how this endgame will play out.

Great Master in *Philosophy of the Masters, Vol. I*, says:

Death is not to be feared. It is only the name given to the phenomenon of the soul leaving the body. After discarding the physical body, the soul ascends to the astral, causal, and higher regions.... It is merely the withdrawal of the soul from the gross senses, and its entrance into finer regions. It is merely giving up the present garment, namely, the body. It does not mean annihilation. There is life after death, although we may not be able to see it.

The saints have solved the mystery of death. They leave the human body every day and travel into the astral and causal regions. In their company we learn the means by which we too can triumph over death.

That is the promise and comfort of Sant Mat. Gradually the garments that were lent to us at our birth – our bodies – get shabbier and a little more worn at the elbows despite our efforts to keep them clean, wrinkle-free, and mended. Eventually these coats, these garments, will wear out for good and we will get to turn them in for the radiant ones the Master promises. The lessons we learn as we age, the lessons of this path, assure us that we will arrive in great shape for our next great adventure in the higher regions.



Joy

The topic of this article is specifically the joy, happiness, peace, contentment, humour, and relaxation to be found on this spiritual path.

While many of us might be more comfortable with reading about the subjects of the pain of separation, longing, tragedies of this world, or the necessity for disciplined endurance, the truth is that the teachings of the saints are about joy and hope. Joy and hope, not only when we ultimately merge back into God and the divine music, but also the happiness that can accompany us as we travel back to our spiritual home.

Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Quest for Light*:

Please remember there is no place for any disappointment or dejection in Sant Mat. It is a path of joy and hope. When the Lord has chosen you for eternal liberation, then what other power can keep you back for long in this creation?... The Master will see you back home. So give up all your worries and with love and devotion do your duty every day. Give time to bhajan and simran without caring as to how the mind behaves.... The Master is always with you and so is his love.

Hazur Maharaj Ji also says in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II*, “Well, you can only break strong attachments by experiencing joy, joy from becoming one with the sound and light within.” And while we may personally know little about the laughter of God, in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*, Maharaj Charan Singh says:

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

Whether you are currently a laughing disciple or a weeping one, all human beings want joy and happiness. The English poet, Charles Williams summarizes the entire meaning of human life as the “intention of joy”.

In *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. I*, Maharaj Charan Singh clearly explains this human intention for happiness, pleasure, and joy:

Mind is always seeking pleasure. And when it gets into the taste of a better pleasure, automatically its tendency becomes upward, inward. And that is the divine design by which the soul goes back to the Father.

Then the mind gets peace. Even the mind doesn't want to live in misery; the mind also wants peace. When we are happy, it is our mind which is happy. When we are miserable, it is our mind which is miserable. The mind is seeking happiness. That is a characteristic of the mind – to seek happiness. The moment it finds a channel for happiness, it diverts to that side.

In seeking happiness, the mind is persuaded by happiness... It wants happiness. It wants peace. It wants bliss. It is very, very miserable, being a slave of the senses.

When the soul merges into its own source, it is the most blissful and best happiness one can get.

Many people turn to the hope of spiritual happiness when worldly happiness doesn't work for them. The secret, of course, is that happiness in the material world doesn't work for anyone very well – or for very long. Worldly pleasure is always short lived and holds with it the potential for loss, sorrow, and pain. Maharaj Charan Singh says, "It can never be a pleasure. It's only a question of time before it is converted to misery." Why would he say this? In *Spiritual Discourses, Vol. II*, he explains further:

Without exception, everything we see is transient and perishable, and whatever little happiness we glimpse, is inevitably transformed with the passage of time into sorrow.

The Master tells us that there is only one place where we will find true joy and that is in relationship with the Lord. The achievement of happiness on a spiritual path means turning our attention away from the transitory world of pleasure and pain, which is followed by more pleasure and pain, and then followed by even more pleasure and pain. The Masters want us to move to a more joyful and stable country. Maharaj Charan Singh continues in *Spiritual Discourses, Vol. II*:

Just imagine if we go to a country where we have absolutely no friends or acquaintances, can we ever be happy or enjoy peace of mind? This entire world is a foreign land for each one of us, and our real home is the home of the Supreme Being, where our real self resides. We take this creation, this alien country to be our real home: we take what does not belong to us to be ours. How can we possibly attain peace and happiness in it?

If our desire is to attain joy, if what we want is lasting happiness, Hazur gives explicit instructions in the same selection:

If you wish to attain happiness, if you wish to find peace, you must return to your real home. This land is not your land, this race is not your race, this religion is not your religion. Your native land is Sach Kand, the true realm; your race is Satnam, the true Name; your religion is love for the Lord. You have come into this world as a foreigner, and now you are wandering around restlessly, never feeling quite at home.

But just in case you have reached the conclusion that joy in Sant Mat is postponed until after you reach the eye centre, or at the moment of death, or in some far off distant time when you finally become a better person, Maharaj Charan Singh says in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. II*:

You see, when you sit in meditation, whether you make any progress or not, you definitely feel bliss and peace and happiness within.... So you feel the effect of meditation before you actually see any progress within.... There is some form of contentment.

It shouldn't surprise any disciple that the key to experiencing happiness in Sant Mat is through the meditation practice, even when it seems to be a dry and difficult meditation practice. Hazur, in the same volume, explains:

Daily attendance to meditation definitely gives you some bliss and peace and happiness within yourself. You can go through your routine of the whole day without losing your balance much

if you are attending to your meditation every day.... Even if a blind man cannot admire the beauty of the flowers, definitely he can enjoy their smell, and when he'll get eyesight, he will enjoy the beauty also.

Even if all we see is darkness within, we can remember that we are in the Master's presence. That sweet fragrance is available in meditation, while we are doing simran or attending satsang. If the Master were to walk into your room right now, imagine the smile that would be on your face! Imagine the joy that would soar in your heart! Why? Because his happiness is contagious, unstoppable, all powerful.

The Masters share their joy with us, primarily through meditation, through the help they give us within.

All the help that we need, we always get within. We are never left alone. We are not orphaned. There's somebody to guide us, somebody to lead us, somebody to pull us forward, somebody to push us forward within.

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

With the fragrance of the divine garden from daily meditation, in the presence of one whose essence is joy, there is at least one more way that we can find happiness in the material world: doing unselfish service that pleases the Master.

The Master said recently that even he needs to do his seva, because it pleases his Master. Seva means offering our service, our gifts, our capabilities to God. We are told that nothing pleases our Master, nothing pleases the Lord more than meditation, offering our attention, and loving God with all our heart, mind, and soul. But we are also told that we are here to help one another, to love our neighbour. If we

can serve others with kindness, compassion, charity, forgiveness, and generosity, we are pleasing the Master. And remembering this can perhaps make us a little happier.

Count on the Master to lovingly teach us how to become a happier person. And it is not by forced cheerfulness or fake smiles. The joy of this path is not a form of intellectual discipline or a result of a personality of unending optimism and cheer. Being happy is neither an intellectual decision, nor a preference of temperament. Maharaj Charan Singh explains that we cannot calculate happiness, manipulate it, or command it. Happiness will come naturally. He says in *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*:

For example you say: I'd like to be happy today, I'm going to smile today – no matter how miserable you may be within.... If you are miserable within, your face will reflect that, your face will betray your feelings. I mean, we try to give smiling looks sometimes to people when we are miserable within. But our looks betray us. And people who are happy – even if they don't say a word – their face betrays that they are happy, howsoever they try to become serious. This is a certain expression which you can't conceal.

In the same volume, he gives us some hints as to how we can improve our chances for experiencing some happiness here and now.

[T]ry to learn how to laugh. You must relax from within. When there is a weight on your conscience, when something is always weighing on your heart within, you can't laugh, you can't relax. You can only be humorous when you're relaxed within.

That is a state of being worth looking forward to!

The nearer we are to him, the happier we are becoming every day. The real happiness will come only when you merge back into him after meeting him face to face.... The nearer we are to the Lord, the nearer we are to our destination, the more contentment we feel within; the more bliss, the more peace, the more happiness we feel within.

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

Rumi, the thirteenth-century mystic poet, asks:

Isn't it strange, that we are being dragged out of our fiery furnaces and smoky hell and we are being dragged into the fragrance of the eternal rose garden, and all we are doing is howling and lamenting?

Rumi, as quoted in *Between Heaven and Mirth* by James Martin

For those of us who think this path is very long, and very difficult, and that God-realization is a result of a lot of karmic pain and suffering, it is good to be reminded that we are destined for joy. We were created for bliss and peace and contentment. Even now we are coming closer to our home, and our particular story has an extraordinarily happy ending.

It is not that the material, illusionary world can't offer us some glimpses of happiness. Here, in this world we can find some pleasure. But the moments of happiness and respite won't last. The world is always changing: sometimes with comfort, sometimes with pain. Sometimes there is birth, sometimes death. Sometimes we are given companions, sometimes loneliness. But eventually we have to say

good-bye to every person, every pleasure, every possession, and every project. That is the transient world. Our spiritual path offers the alternative. Seek that which does not change. Go within. Find the truth and the joy that will set you free.

Maharaj Charan Singh concludes in the Epilogue of *Spiritual Perspectives, Vol. III*:

I think that after discussing happiness we shouldn't discuss anything else.



Book Review

Ruysbroeck

BY EVELYN UNDERHILL

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<http://archive.org/details/texts/>.

The author, Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), called John Ruysbroeck “one of the very greatest mystics whom the world has yet known.” Underhill wrote many books on Christian mysticism, but is best known for her 1911 classic *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man’s Spiritual Consciousness*. In this ground-breaking work, she studied writings from various world religions seeking to discern the essential nature of mysticism. She referred frequently to John Ruysbroeck throughout this volume, and in 1915 followed up that interest by publishing *Ruysbroeck*.

In studying the life and teachings of John Ruysbroeck (1293-1381), Underhill refers often to patterns she found in her broader study of mysticism. She points out, for example, that, like all the greatest mystics, his mystical writings are clearly based on direct, personal experience, but that at the same time his images, metaphors and concepts emerge from his own cultural tradition, Christianity. In fact, a long line of Christian theologians bequeathed Ruysbroeck “the intellectual framework in which his sublime intuitions were expressed.”

To speak of John Ruysbroeck, as some enthusiastic biographers have done, as an isolated spiritual phenomenon totally unrelated to the life of his time, an ‘ignorant monk’ whose profound knowledge of reality is entirely the result of personal inspiration and independent of human history, is to misunderstand his greatness.

His gift was to carry precept into action and to “completely actualize in his own experience the high vision of the soul’s relation to the Divine Reality.”

In the history of the spiritual adventures of man, we find at intervals certain great mystics who appear to gather up and fuse together in the crucible of the heart the diverse tendencies of those who have preceded them, and, adding to them the tincture of their own rich experience, give to us an intensely personal, yet universal, vision of God and man.

John Ruysbroeck, sometimes spelled Jan van Ruusbroec, was born in 1293 in the village of Ruysbroeck in Belgium, from which he takes his name. In the first chapter, Underhill gives a sketch of his life. At age eleven, he ran away from home, making his way to Brussels and into the care of his uncle John Hinckaert, a Canon (priest) of the Cathedral of St. Gudule. At the time, Hinckaert was just embarking on a quest for spiritual perfection along with another Canon of the Cathedral, Francis van Coudenberg. The two of them had given their possessions to the poor and set up a simple household where they dedicated their lives to spiritual practice. In this household, Ruysbroeck “found a home soaked in love, governed by faith, renunciation, humility.”

As a youth, he had an “astonishing aptitude for religious ideas, even of the most subtle kind, [and] his passionate clear vision of spiritual things was already so highly developed as to attract general attention.” In 1317 he was ordained a priest and given a position as a cathedral chaplain, a duty he conscientiously fulfilled for the next twenty-six years. Throughout his writings, Ruysbroeck stresses the importance of balancing the intense inner life of devotion with a life of service to humanity – what he calls a life of “action.” As Underhill sums up his teachings on “action”:

Action is of the very essence of human reality. Where the inner life is genuine and strong, the outer life will reflect, however faintly, the curve on which it moves; for human consciousness is a unit, capable of reacting to and synthesizing two orders, not an unresolved dualism – as it were, an angel and an animal – condemned to lifelong battle within a narrow cage.

During this period, from the age of 26 to 52, Ruysbroeck lived with his uncle and Coudenberg, intensively engaged in contemplative practice while also living the busy but inconspicuous life of a priest. It was “during these years, and in the midst of incessant distractions, that he passed through the great oscillations of consciousness which mark the mystic way.” Underhill postulates that by the end of this period his soul had evolved from, in his words, “the state of the ‘faithful servant’ to the transfigured existence of the ‘God-seeing man.’”

Then in 1343, together with Hinckaert and Coudenberg, he moved to an old hermitage called Groenendael (meaning green valley) in the forest of Soignes near Brussels. Ruysbroeck’s growing reputation for sanctity and as a seer and spiritual director would attract seekers from throughout Europe. Within five years the quiet forest retreat had been transformed into a thriving Augustinian monastery. Still, Groenendael afforded Ruysbroeck long hours sitting under his favourite tree, in “profound absorption in God.”

Like so many of the greatest mystics, Ruysbroeck, drawing nearer to Divine Reality, drew nearer to nature too; conforming to his own ideal of the contemplative, who, having been raised to the simple vision of God Transcendent, returns to find His image reflected by all life. Many passages in his writings show the closeness and sympathy of his observation of natural things: the vivid description of ... the spring, summer and autumn of the fruitful soul, the insistence on the constant phenomena of growth, lessons drawn from the habits of ants and bees.

Despite his growing fame and advancing age, visitors were impressed by the peace and joy of his countenance and “his humble good-humoured speech.” Eventually, on December 2, 1381, at the age of 88, he died in his beloved Groenendael, “keeping to the last his clear spiritual vision, his vigour and eagerness of soul.”

In Chapter Two, Underhill gives a brief synopsis and analysis of Ruysbroeck’s writings. He wrote, not in Church Latin, but in the Flemish vernacular of his day, making his works accessible to all. Underhill describes his compositions:

Founded on experience, they deal with and incite to experience; and were addressed to all who felt within themselves the stirrings of a special grace, the call of a superhuman love, irrespective of education or position – to hermits, priests, nuns, and ardent souls still in the world who were trying to live the one real life – not merely to learned professors trying to elucidate the doctrines of that life.

The remaining chapters of this book draw out the main points of his teachings. For example, Chapter Three deals with Ruysbroeck's doctrines on the nature of God and the Godhead, the "Abyss of Pure Being," which he describes with a series of oblique images – "Simplicity and One-foldedness; inaccessible height and fathomless depth; incomprehensible breadth and eternal length; a dim silence, and a wild desert."

The final chapter concerns what Underhill calls "the Superessential Life," in which the soul attains "Glory" or union with God. Ruysbroeck describes this state:

When we soar up above ourselves, and become, in our inward striving towards God, so simple, that the naked Love in the Heights can lay hold on us, there where Love cherishes Love, above all activity and all virtue (that is to say, in our Origin, wherefrom we are spiritually born) – then we cease, and we and all that is our own die into God. And in this death we become hidden Sons of God, and find in ourselves a new life, and that is Eternal Life.

Underhill concludes with a bibliography which, though once current, is now incomplete. Since 1915 a number of English translations of Ruysbroeck's works have appeared. Several of these can be found for free online (see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ruysbroeck> for links).



