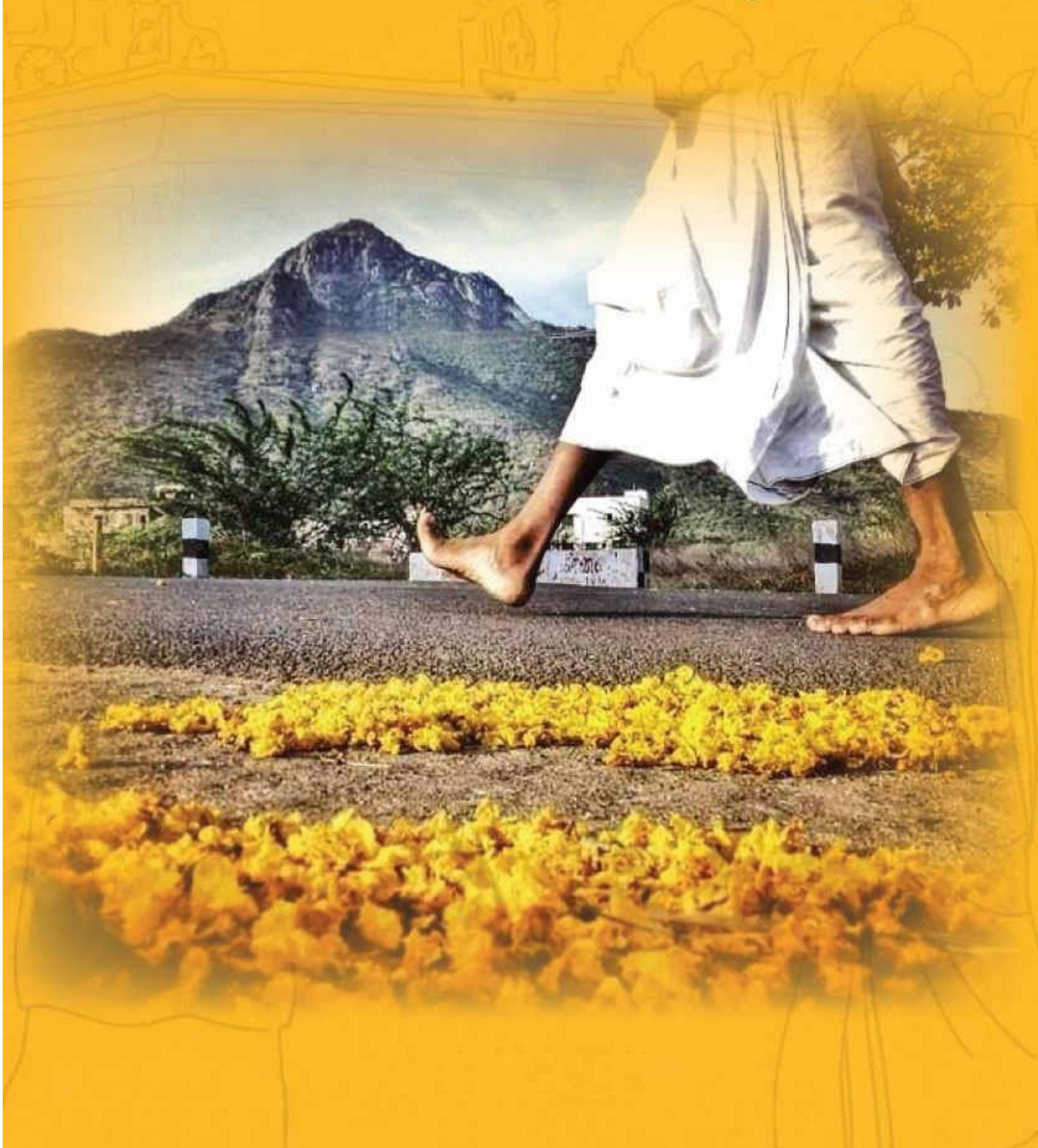


Pradakshina

Circumambulations around the Satguru's path



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एको देव एकधर्म एकनिष्ठा परं तपः ।
गुरोः परतरं नान्यत् नास्ति तत्त्वं गुरोः परम् ॥

– The Guru Gita



There is but one God, one dharma, a single loyalty,
and one incomparable means of realization:
The Guru – The Real, beyond which there is
nothing higher or greater

Pradakshina: Circumambulations around the Satguru's path

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PREFACE



I do not recollect when precisely I met Guruji. Suffice it to say that I was a young man who had recently got his first job.

We clicked inexpressibly. I'd go to him as often as possible to find a security that was then alien to me. I was able to forget the demands of the day and the emotional toil they took of me. I also received, without expectation of any return, the best food in the world, *darshan*, peace, the teachings of the shabads and the Guru's grace.

Ever since, Guruji's grace has latched on to me, a person whose mental landscape blurs and changes with time and fancy. Incredible stories can be told of his superhuman powers and my life bears witness to a few of them. Yet that is not what is at the core of our relationship, and what I write here is an attempt to disentangle the substantial from the superficial, to arrive at what our relationship means, what the disciple's journey means, and how it goes forward.

Guruji is fully love, love incarnate yet quiet, still and inexpressible. This kind of love inheres inside the heart and is activated by the Guru. It is mysterious and unknowable not only because it is different from the everyday ken of experience but also because it is so innate to us that it is difficult for us to see and acknowledge it - like the fish not being cognisant of water. The reservoir of affection that flows from God to Guru to us allows us to deliver its sweet waters through many tributaries to others. Yet in our affections we forget the granter of this repository of love - God alone.

We do not love our Guru with our ever-vacillating mind, but with our heart. Even the greatest *gyani* will find his mind a shallow vehicle to be the receptacle of a Guru's tireless love. What Guruji does is to bring out the love that is deep inside our heart. He coaxes this love out, purifies it, moves it, nourishes it, performs miracles and wonders, but finally he brings it out. The Guru is thus an operational agent of love, even as he is love himself. The love between Guruji and his disciples is very human - at least for me. It is love anchored in reality, expressed in Truth, yet affectionately natural.

It is easy to demean this love by placing demands upon it; a mistake I have often made, taking for granted both Guruji's love and his grace. I can't imagine how it would have turned out had it not been for him and his forgiveness.

Some time before Guruji gave up his mortal form, he told me that I had to write a few books. I hope this one goes some way at least in fulfilling his command, which has also been my cherished desire. It required some probationary work and would not have been possible without his grace. He is the great archer bending the bow of truth, and these words are his arrows of grace, love, and sweet benediction. They will find their mark!

ONE

Sharan: Finding refuge

It was a large, expectant hall. Earlier it had been hushed in semi-darkness; now the lights were blazing. A stilled sense of awe and hope, a dam of energy was poised between silence and restiveness. Then people were getting up and he was walking through the centre of the hall. It was not 'graceful' walk. It was the ascent of fleet lightning to its rightful chair. (One remembers how he walked: quickly, apt to change direction suddenly at times.)

I was in a line - measured by my longing to reach him, immeasurably long - of those going up to pay obeisance. Hopeful and filled with trepidation, I moved along. My mind seemed to go into its own space, exfoliating memories. Whom had I injured and why? Who had injured me? On the confusing legs of duality - with the fear of the unknown and the hope of receiving love, foreboding at being reprimanded and the expectation of being forgiven, with old guilt and courage newly surfaced - I walked up to where he sat with folded hands. I bent down and touched his feet.

I looked up - and his hands were folded, too. The image sticks to my mind nearly 18 years after. Perhaps that was my first lesson: humility. Yet how many times (and still) was I to forget it. At that moment, he made it seem that the blessing- givers and the blessed are both complementary. And through the years I saw him, he never stuck a pose. He was never anything but simply himself, anchored in this role that he had chosen of being 'Guruji'.

What he was, of course, is the question. It's like asking what air is. Where is its source? Does it come from a geometrical point or from a vortex of energy? How is it made? Who moves it? Like the air, he was with us all the time, enveloping us. Yet we knew him not. But that wasn't ever the only question. For if we probed him with our minds, the force of our query turned upon ourselves. And we struggled to understand, we tried to love, or we trusted him with our hearts. It was a great churning- a *manthan* - and will always be so.

The pressing queue allowed only for the feather of a moment at his feet. I sat down or stood at the edge of the exit from the hall, gazing at him. My

looking at him hasn't changed over the years and neither has how he looked. There is no change; no depredation of time has come between us or is likely to. He is the same and I am the same. It is only when I shift, when I become aware of the adjacencies of my existence, that our gaze is broken. I know that we will irrevocably reach where we have to. It is not a question of time; it is a point wholly beyond time and its dominion. It is a place of eternal refuge. Meanwhile, the heart rolls on.

Watching him thus from afar, for years, I was caught up in emotions. His effect *in* you was subtle. He could take your emotions out, replace them, overhaul them, get them back to the same state, or leave them untouched - without any physical agency, of course. If you were roiled, he could roil you further and purge you of agony. He could increase the beat of your conflict and pulverize it. He could strengthen your fear and finish it off. Most people remember being lost to the world at his gatherings, forgetting the stabs of worries, the press of duty, and the imperatives of sustenance. He could effortlessly return you to yourself.

Watching him thus from afar, I was moved many times. Many times did I taste of love and grace, of benediction and mercy, of clemency. Guruji's love was invisible. You wondered about it at your worst moments; perhaps even at your best, because he never spoke about it. Love was him. You could also wonder whether you had a substantive relationship with Guruji. Did you register for Guruji, you could ask. The moment you left the question, resigned yourself to the inner inaudible dialogue with him, Guruji would ask about you: Where is he? How hasn't he come? Where has he gone? (The inner dialogue, which is merely a stand-in for communion, receives scant answers.)

And it began all over again. You squeezed Guruji and he gave more love.

It now seems that being with him was made of so many beginnings and ends. You could write about it at the rate of one per month to ten per day. He turned you on and off, but he was never far away.

Guruji came to you in different ways. Some found him in music, some in words spoken by others, some in dreams, some in butterflies, some in flowers, some in visions, some in fragrance. They found him wherever they could receive him. He was mentor, guide, ruler, protector, husband, father, mother, brother and son. He was a relative, he was the host, he was an honoured guest; he was majestic, sublime, down to earth. He was dressed in robes of opulence, magnificent in T-shirts, contemporary in his shoes, common in his shorts,

otherworldly in all.

In this variety of roles, he remained absolutely himself. I suspect he gave these roles to himself. The purpose was to mislead and to enlighten us. He, at least at some level, saw it as a game.

I saw him from afar and now I see this from a distance in time. When he was near me, physically, that is, I felt overwhelmed. If possible, I saw him even more intensely. You recalled that meeting over and over in your mind later. What did he say? What did he mean? How did he smile? This was romance!

I brought questions to him, and unvoiced complaints and all manner of personal injuries (real or imagined). I brought unasked questions of vital philosophic depth. I inquired about the teaching and the path, about the songs and stories of truth, about the shabads constantly played at his gatherings, about the clearly amazing experiences of his flock and about the easy sweetness of his caring.

Were all of these reactions deflected? Or were all questions turned upon myself to solve? I don't know. But I was never turned away. No matter what I did or didn't, Guruji always accepted me. I didn't have to test that; I knew it.

We brought other things too. Our uncles and aunts; the relative with the troubled leg or the despairing mind; the atheist friend; the man struck with cancer. He healed them or gave them endurance or love or reprimands or smiles or the umbrella-like silence of his being or release. He gave, and didn't expect anything in return.

His was a money-less world. There was no medium of barter. Devotees said you were expected to surrender, have faith, be patient. Very true. But he didn't turn any away. Not even if you couldn't find it within yourself to be with him. He was still there for you - always - as soon as you were ready for him. At heart, he was uniquely sensitive and responsive to the one before him. At heart, he blessed you no matter what. At heart, he was saying, "I love you unreservedly." At heart, he saw the mess you were in and helped. At heart, he didn't condone misbehaviour. At heart, he simply gave more and more of his heart.

Was I listening?

He treated everyone the same, but he gave me what I needed. Since no two people were the same, each person got a different line of treatment. Some learnt

persistence and patience, others decisiveness and boldness. Some were reassured, others ignored. All were healed - most physically, some more deeply, and a few perhaps fully.

People came to him for something, he said. There were aches and agonies all around; broken this and broken that; incomplete this and underdeveloped that. The entire school of humanity was fishing at his feet for something. And he always said that they never asked for the real thing.

In fact, he had a story to explain such commonly weird behaviour. He said that when God was coming down to earth, His mother was worried. She said that if He went down, He would liberate everyone in a flash. God told her that was not the case. His creatures would be entranced with desires. Everyone would be engaged in the circle of wanting, having and then wanting more. No one would want Him!

Such has been the case.

That being said, what drew us to him? Not our desires alone, though they were powerful. Not our misery alone too, though that too was undeniable. What drew me to him was a part of him that is lodged within me. It's a part that you can't cut with the knife of time. It is that which remains when everything is taken away.

My guess is that we get Guruji when everything does indeed go away. When all the detritus of desire, the flotsam and jetsam of relationships, the miasma of our psyche is purified. It is not a physical ending of the world or the body; it is a cessation of the mind and the levels of the unconscious.

Did he tell us that? Did he teach us that? Yes, though indirectly. He led us to it. We saw the mind inside us. We tried to tame it; we watched it from a distance or we were caught in its movements. But we became aware of it, and then we left it to him. He will heal it. He will.

Ours was a meeting beyond place and time. It did not matter that I had just got a job when I met him, and it did not matter where I met him. What had brought us together was the dynamic of an old relationship, whose forces met just then. He was the grand butterfly-catcher, with a gold-rimmed net made from wires of light, and I was the butterfly. It did not mean an end to freedom, so dear to the individual. But an expansion of its scope. A freedom not limited to the capacity of the mind and heart. For His freedom is absolute.

Caught in his net, what happened? Disciples were taken to class and fed with *langar* and lessons. The lesson wasn't on the blackboard: it was grounded in the event that came up. With his grace, we could absorb the lesson, or be reminded again of it. But lessons we had. And after some time - while the lessons were continuing - we were allowed to walk. We interacted with other devotees; we served devotees; we told our own stories of faith to others; we brought acquaintances in; we took up some responsibility; we led our lives.

The process of teaching wasn't separate from our lives. Our lives were coming to us with teachings in hand; we needed to accept them. Guruji was not an abstraction, but a present, throbbing reality. He did not need a method to teach us. There was no secret technique to learn. There was no elite order based on spiritual competence. Instead there was an exchange of faith and of trust. There was an opening up of the heart, a slow cleansing of the mind. Old patterns were lost. Even new habits were uprooted. After time, a few old habits regenerated, but now they returned like old coats easy on the shoulders. One could shrug them off whenever one wanted to.

And always there were celebrations! The gatherings were marked with joy. After the shabads were over, you could stuff yourself on *prasad* and music - perhaps a *ghazal* or a folksy tune - and dance if he allowed it. For dance, in his presence was not frivolous abandonment but an offering to Lord Shiva. Specific points of the Indian spiritual calendar were punctuated with festivals of blessings: Baisakhi, Shivratri, His birthday, Guru Purnima, and later even New Year's Eve.

I remember once standing in queue to give him a rose: walked up to him via the queue of devotees and just gave it to him. He took it as prosaically as I had given it. For he was a mirror, reflecting what we were bringing. Why, he'd even cut the cake for your birthday! Nothing was profane. The distinction between good and bad, *pavitra* and *papi* was obliterated. Moral superiority showed itself to be spiritual superciliousness. Spiritual one-upmanship - oh boy, you would learn very soon that he had no truck with that.

Watching him thus from afar, I saw him joke and laugh; look intently at his flock; gaze at someone from the corner of his eye or with a palm on his forehead. I saw him talk to the flock; I saw him give attention for days to one single person; I saw him give hot *kadha* *prasad* from bare hands to hundreds; I saw him distribute sweet *emarti*. I saw him manifest *prasad*. I saw him with a headache after that. I saw him looking grumpy; I saw him enjoying a joke. I saw him call for more *langar*, more *prasad*, more *satsangs*. I saw him give

everything. I saw him eat two rotis with dal at the end of the gatherings. At least I saw what he wanted me to see.

A part of it was seeing him in a hospital. He was going to get up and walk out. But he didn't. And yet he remained with us, with me. A vital presence, as real as the scent of his being that came without footfall and caught one with joyous surprise. It still catches me, enthrals me and beckons me.

TWO

Upasana: Cultivating a disciple's consciousness



The Guru-disciple relationship rests on the unity of the spirit, but till that unity is found and embodied they are two different beings. The relationship starts from duality but ends in absolute unity. As long as both can be spoken of as being different, and being different not in terms of scale (whether you measure in terms of power or love or spiritual advancement) but in kind, two ways of formulating the relationship present themselves. One, the relationship or path of devotion or love; the other, the path of knowledge. In both, the Guru expects complete unconditional surrender from the disciple.

The disciple is distinguished from the Guru in kind primarily through his carrying of an ego. The Guru stands apart from the ego; his ego is merely a functional aspect of being - like clothes worn over the body. For the disciple, the ego is who he is. The disciple gets a name, a role to play, and certain equipment to carry these out. He identifies with all of these. The disciple thinks in terms of what is mine. This 'mine-ness' is at root a projection of the ego, which requires the addition of desires so that it can carry on. The ego is built on the foundation stones of a mistaken identity to which the building blocks of desires are added incrementally. The entire edifice looks pretty big, but since it is based on the unreal - that is, the sense of mistaken identity - it is entirely illusory.

Sometimes the ego is much mystified in terms of indecipherable subtlety. Yet it is a simple and singular thing; a small spoke around which all our desiring revolves. The definite statement of the ego is not that it wants to be - which is merely functional - but that it wants.

The Guru, in his purest function as the Guru, is there to boot out the ego. Either through the way of knowledge, which leads to the apprehension of the real state of self, or through the way of love, which leads to the abandonment of the ego before the supreme self of the Guru. The way of knowledge is clear cut: You see something that is false and that is it. You do not have to bring in a

bucket of light to cleanse darkness from the room of your being. You see that there is no darkness. That seeing itself is light.

On the path of love, the disciple learns to love his Guru. Through the love of a higher self, he himself rises higher, inculcating within himself the values of dispassion, renunciation, sense-control, same-mindedness, mental equilibrium, as the Guru takes him on and on, higher and ever higher on the path of love. The disciple who is in love with his Guru or God finally becomes love himself. He attains the object of his love. The ego, which gradually finds out that it has no business to be on this journey, drops out of its own accord. The Guru, therefore, acquaints the disciple with his ego. Once the ego is seen, the disciple and Guru work to disarm it according to the path the Guru chooses for the disciple.

After the disciple has taken *sharan* or refuge in his Guru, he sits before him - in both the path of love and knowledge. This is *up+asana*, which literally means to be in an *asana* before the Guru. Figuratively, this means to sit like an empty vehicle before the Guru, so that his grace and teachings pour into the disciple.

Grace is what links the Guru and the disciple together. Grace is the bridge that allows the disciple to see his faults, overcome them and move on. Grace allows him to remain under the active protection or refuge of the Guru and persevere on the spiritual path. *The Guru is Grace.*

The Guru is the knower of reality, its absolute Master; the Purusha who is the lord of Prakriti, Shiva himself. The disciple is blind. There really is no other description. Perhaps we can add that the disciple is blind but is willing to see - an aptly feeble description for a handicapped state. The disciple may invest a lot of energy in trying to see, understand or be devotional. But the thing is that spiritual knowledge and devotion are not virtues or values that one builds. They are what is inside of us. Clarity, vision, devotion: these are a matter of being, not of what one can become. The disciple has to be uprooted of what he has imputed himself to be - that is, the false projections and desires that form his ego. He has to be unmade rather than made.

The Guru-disciple relationship therefore sketches, in the relative, human scale, a fundamental contrast - like that of father and child. However, this is not a separateness of being, because if that was the case then the relationship would have a beginning, a middle, and an end. It would be like a relationship between two separate people tied together by social and familial conventions and - since

its ostensible focus is on the 'spiritual' side - benignly sacred myth. In its basic form, however, the relationship is fundamental. The Guru is the steadfast, silently loving yet cathartic vehicle in which the disciple can see himself as he is.

However, this is a description based on a relative scale. On the absolute scale, the Upanishad has the last word in its brilliant metaphor: That of two birds on the tree of existence. One is engrossed in eating fruit - this is the disciple, whereas the other bird merely looks on - he is the unitary witness or the guru.

The path of love or faith demands complete surrender and unquestioning obedience. It is not immediately appealing to strong egos, which here means people with a strong sense of self. A strong sense of self is seen in those who possess a clear sense of distinction between right and wrong and of knowing how to act in key situations. Sometimes, the stronger and clearer a sense of self, the more difficult it can be to surrender to certain situations or life-demands.

That is perplexing. A strong ego can act strongly, decisively and clear-mindedly because it so closely identifies itself with its projections and desires. It sees its way clearly. But this way is the way of self-aggrandizement and self-protection, not the spiritual path. This is the way, the successful way, it must be said, of the worldly man. But love is magical and the Guru's investment of love, even in the hardest of egos, makes them pliable. This alone is a testament to the power of the real self within all of us. For why would the Guru's love work if there was no answering self to respond to it? Even the hardest of egos, the most die-hard materialist within us answers to love. Hence, the way of love sometimes works best for the strongest egotist. While the way of knowledge can be dangerous for him, merely affirming and cementing his mistaken notions into an outrageous monstrosity - a dictatorship of the ego.

Therefore the vital necessity of building up unimpeachable trust, *shraddha*, in the Guru. For an understanding of the Guru is the *furthest* outpost of wisdom and rare are those souls who come to it immediately. For the Guru is indescribable and unfathomable. This is not a trite truism, but the truth. The Guru is the Truth. To say you have understood Him is to be one with the Truth; it means you have reached the end of the journey and got the grand prize of self-realization.

Till the time the disciple is unable to have a clear, firm and loving understanding of who his Guru is, he has to invest in trusting the Guru. It is the

Guru who helps build trust: Holding the wary disciple's hand in his, he leads him across many life situations till the disciple understands the Guru is acting on his best behalf and grows confident and secure. At last, he is able to stand on his own and finds that it is Faith and Truth that stand within him.

The disciple leaves many actions and feelings uninitiated, undone and unacknowledged because he sees they are not in his hands. His abandonment of motivations, desires, and acts arises from a thorough understanding of the make-up of the world. He rejects the false, because he has become acquainted with it - and likely because his Guru rubbed his nose in reality and dunked his head under the waters of samsara many times. And then some.

Fortunate are those who are given a bright and simple understanding. It may be termed naive by the world weary, but it is an understanding that others, more abundant in knowledge and articulation, have to learn after they come under the hammer of the blows of life.

The Guru does not wield a hammer all the time, but he can use a surgical lance. And the disciple protests. Not this, says he; exactly that is the ruling of the Guru. Not again, he complains; the Guru looks silently on. Life is a wheel of suffering. Disciples may be eager for liberation, but typically not before having had their surfeit of the material life and having been harried, wounded and totally bored of going round and round.

The Guru uses our situations to put us through a learning experience. We have to learn the lesson, before we can come out of it. Hence, the disciple's many protestations and his self-inflicted sorrow. Clearly, until he accepts certain attitudes and makes himself familiar with them, he will have to deal with the lesson again.

For example: Patience. It is required, and not only in the practical affairs of the world. Things happen in time, and most of them are fixed to occur at a certain time. This is as true of traffic jams as it is of meditational flights. Patience does not imply giving up self-effort. It suggests only that the season for flowering is set. What makes the wait easier is gratitude. An appreciation of the striking fact that you are on the path and walking on it despite setbacks. Gratitude is a formidable solvent of arguments and complaints. It is key to remaining latched on to the path and the Guru, when motivations and energies have come under a strain. Gratitude is an antidote to the temporary fallings into churlishness that a disciple is wont to get into.

What the disciple does not understand is that his arguments are mind- and

ego-made. He may not be able to see the ego clearly, but he can feel its machinations. The ego can be felt keenly: it is desire. It can be said to be subtle and evasive only because we are able to find justifications and arm our desires with a specious appeal to righteousness, the standards of the day, and other feeble conjectures.

These are subterfuges and tactics set up to waylay the disciple from the spirit's journey. What the Guru clearly sees is how the disciple can find liberation and nudges and prods him along. But at times the disciple refuses to go on until certain conditions are met and entreats for favourable circumstances. When a Guru does not relent, disciples are faced by a hard choice: Their way or the Guru; obstinacy or obedience; combativeness or acquiescence. To leave everything in the Guru's hand requires a better understanding of and a more steady commitment to the Guru. In all situations, it can be readily admitted with foresight, that *the Guru is right*.

The disciple will find it good to let go of things that are not in his hands. And these are many many things. In fact, it is best to let go of our hands entirely and submit to the Guru, who is the prompting of our innermost divine self, and say: "You do what you want to do through me. Please do not allow me to come in between and worry myself. Kindly take care of your creation. It is yours, not mine; so you take care of it. I am here only to serve for a time and place and at your behest. Please let things that have to happen through me happen and that don't have to happen through me, let them not happen. Kindly allow me to surrender my doer-ship to you. Be so kind as to remove this taint of separation from my mind. Clean my mind so that I can see reality as is, so that I can venerate and celebrate the truth and spread the joy of its being. Let me completely cease to be so that you, the divine that is hidden within me, manifests through my body and my senses. Make my mind your servant and make my heart your sanctuary. May my heart see you in every being that crosses my path; may I see your hand in every incident that comes into my consciousness. May my consciousness be perfectly united with yours. May you forever reside in me as my Guru and may my consciousness forever be your disciple."

THREE

Shabad Shravan: The precious jewel of Guruji's teachings

It was the Guru's Word that first knocked at the rusted doors of my soul even as they creaked with resistance. Their unvoiced complaint was at the volume the shabads were played at Guruji's, as if my ears were protesting against the intrusion of reality. But after a short while, the shabads poured in.

The opening prayer of the Shri Guru Granth Sahibji, the very first utterance of Shri Guru Nanak after his storied three-day immersion in the river, was penetrating. The *shabad* was rendered like a prose poem, each word isolated and strong, like a slab of rock: *Ek Onkar Satnam Karta Purukh Nirbhau Nirvair Akalmurat Ajuni Saibhang Gurprasad Jap Aad Sach Jugaad Sach Hai Bhi Sach Nanak Hosi Bhi Sach.*

Punjabi was an unfamiliar language, but the truth force of those words resonated in the ears, even in sleep. Perhaps the experience was overpowering because I did not come to the words of the Satguru, the shabads, with any pre-conceived knowledge of what they were and so was able to hear them fully. I did not know what they meant. But information or meaning is not necessary to hearing. A simple song can move us even in the midst of a busy day; an energetic rock and roll number pumps us up. A prayer, a song in praise of the lord, a couplet hinting at the paradox of life, its transience, its emptiness, at how the devotional aspirant is made fit to be a disciple, similarly penetrates our consciousness. It is like the best poetry: it evokes in the reader feelings and attitudes similar, if not identical, to what the poet has. So too the words of the great fakirs and saints: they have a spiritual charge because they arise from the devotional super-urge towards the spirit. The words carry the spirit of the sacred being that pronounces them. Hence, just listening to them carries the hearer into that mind and heart space that the sage had. That touch of the spirit is in the auricular quality of the words; it is not bound in meaning alone. It is not as if punctilious observance to the meaning of the word is going to render some breath-taking insight. What matters is not entering into the meaning of the words like a pundit, but entering into the devotional space that the shabads open

up.

We may be much-rusted and recalcitrant instruments, but in the hands of the Guru our heart-strings are tuned subtly to welcome the spirit. The act of attunement does not pre-suppose knowledge, because it has got nothing to do with what you learn in books. A great scholar of Gurmukhi and one who is hearing Punjabi for the first time are before the sublime door of the shabads equal. In fact, the pundit will likely have difficulty appreciating the music because he will listen to it through the framework of his knowledge. The untutored will dive straight in.

Guruji has given devotees such a wonderful and simple method. It does not require hard labour or practice; knowledge or devotion. It just requires an immersion into music - and rare is the person who is not moved by music. The music of the shabads is like a clear refreshing stream. We dip into it and are healed and made whole, our hearts and minds cleansed of all the worldly detritus that we manage to accumulate day in and day out.

Such penetration can be sown deep during a satsang. Hence, the injunction not to mix shabads with other activity. The devotee does not get their full benefit, and perhaps without meaning to, ends up not fully respecting them. When you are engaged in service or other work, a *shabad* does not penetrate your consciousness.

In a satsang, where Guruji himself has taken his seat, where the energy of the Truth is present - for what is a satsang but, literally, being with Truth - the shabads are particularly potent vehicles of carrying spiritual seeds into our heart. Hence the absolute silence externally and internally, in the listener's mind, that is required to listen to the shabads. In fact, the second of these is the reason why the shabads are put on loud. The shabads drown out the ever-present chatter of the mind.

It is easy, particularly if the disciple is at liberty to wander away from a satsang venue be it a mandir or a home, to avoid listening to shabads. But the disciple ends up missing Guruji's teachings. What then is the disciple there for? Shabads are essential because they lay down Guruji's teachings. They are what Guruji wants disciples to listen to. Why? Because they are tutorials for the spirit. They establish several things; here is a list, which is by no means comprehensive:

1) The shabads explain how necessary it is to have a Guru: *Guru bin ghor andhyaar; guru bin samajh na awe...guru bin mukat na paiyee.*

2) They give us a background, a context for the sacred Guru-disciple relationship, telling us how and why we have come before the Guru: *Bin bhaga satsang na labiye; Purab janam likhya ta satguru paiyee.*

3) They reassure us that the Guru protects us in this journey that we are now willing to take: *Aukhi Ghadi na dekhan dee, Apna birad sambhal.*

4) They elaborate on the qualities of discipleship and the fundamental teachings of spirituality. Longer renditions usually have descriptions and tales in them, which embody several teachings. *Ram ram karta sab jag phira ram na paya jai*, for example, shows how necessary it is to have faith. Another shabad recounts how a devotee through his selfless service and sheer humility, his willingness to bear the burden of others and carry out his Guru's word transformed himself from a common follower Lena to Shri Angad Devji.

Yet another tells us of a peasant couple's unswerving faith in their Guru. The story goes that the couple would have children and would bring them to be blessed before the Satguru, but the infants would pass away soon after. After this tragedy had struck several times, the wife remonstrated before her husband, unwilling to take yet another new-born before the Guru, but he still wanted to. And the Guru blessed the child with a long life. The Guru explained that the infants were fated to die young, and losing their children after having developed attachment towards them would have been much harder for the couple. In a striking manner, this shabad illustrates how the Guru's grace works upon our life. Here, it shortened the period of sorrow.

But Grace does much more. It shows us how empty our so-called happiness is by giving us a flavour of its bliss; and then it shapes us to undertake our spiritual journey.

5) They portray the Truth. One shabads goes straight to the heart of the matter. The Satguru is asked to show what Truth is. He sends his disciple to a shopkeeper, a seller of sweets nearby, with instruction to purchase similar amounts of Truth and Untruth. The shopkeeper, who must have attained to wisdom, writes out a chit: Life is illusory; Death is truth. Shabads, then, become the hard knocks of Truth upon our dull minds and materially clogged hearts. They are a manifestation of the Guru's divine word.

It is not possible to list all their teachings and characteristics. Suffice it to say that shabads are not to be taken lightly. Unless we see that we are here on earth for a limited time - as another shabad so beautifully has it, we are birds briefly nesting on the tree of life - unless we listen to the Truth embodied in this

shabad, how will we get rid of our attachment? How will we get rid of our attachment to our wife, son, property, car and the even harder attachment to our duties? We have to do this and that. Yet we are not the doers. We have to marry our daughters and find brides for our sons and earn our living. Yet we are not the doers. The world carries on wonderfully without us and always has. It is not by our intelligence or labour that we digest the food that (we think) we put on our table. It is not by effort that we sleep or snore or wake up.

Self-effort has its benefits, but it should be distinguished from the aggressive competitive effort made to stay ahead in the material game. It should be distinguished from greed. Greed and spirituality are two different roads, and they don't meet.

Life is a gift. But we have made it into a battlefield. Our effort corrupts us, because we fight for things. The more we try to get ahead, the more desperate our lives become because we come into conflict with other people. Everybody wants to be promoted from his station of life - and if they can't get promoted, they want a better seat with a better view. Or they want a better mixer, a better wardrobe, a better TV unit. This constant striving to get and beget more eats away into our lives. Forget peace, even silence is denied to us.

Hence Guruji's injunction to not ask him for things, but to obey him. As he said: "*Mango nahin, mano.*" Obedience is a wonderful solvent of desire. If you can obey your Guru, you really have nothing else to do. Simple obedience is a spiritual cup full of blessings. It is much easier to obey your Guru than it is to obey, often slavishly and unthinkingly, the demands made upon you by your society, your family, your peers, your halfbaked theories and second-hand ideals. Beyond all, obedience to the Guru keeps you out of the most insistent demand-maker of these all: our own mind.

Hence, the huge difference in quality, nearly in kind, between a *manmukh* and a *gurumukh*: The disciple who is self-centred and the disciple who is Guru-centred. The disciple who follows the guru's *hukm*, which is for his ultimate and absolute benefit, instead of the disciple who follows the behest of his own mind.

The spiritual path is not made of competitors. Competitiveness is inimical to spiritual progress. The Truth is for all, for all, no matter who they are or in which temporary social bucket their identities have been dunked. The land of Truth requires no passport from society, but it absolutely requires the grace of the Guru - even for brief visiting rights let alone permanent residence.

The sweet, devotional relationship we have with Guruji cannot solely be actuated by an intellectual or superficially emotional effort. What is essential is *shraddha* or trust. Trust is an enabler. Trust does not demand to know whether what is asked of it is right or wrong, safe or unsafe, it simply decides to let matters rest in the hands of the trustee. Obedience thence becomes easier.

Trust is natural; it is doubt that is unnatural. The child trusts its mother without knowing the word. It turns to the breast without knowing whether it will get milk or poison. Great devotees have great trust. Great trust grants great power, protection and single-aimed love, or *ekantin bhakti*.

For example: The great saint, Mirabai, the queen of Chittor. When the royal family of Chittor fearing, as people of position are wont to do, the scandal that Mirabai's unorthodox devotions had placed the family at, gave her poison to drink, she took it unhesitatingly. She drank it without any ill-effect. It was because of trust. She trusted her lord Krishna, and took it as a *prasad*. And so it was *prasad* for her.¹

In small ways, we too can trust Guruji and hope to be raised, eventually, to the level of absolute, unconditional love - such as that shown by the great Mirabai.

It is this Trust that activates the connection we have with Guruji. Guruji used to say that making a connection with him was essential. Because it is only then that we are ready to be joined with him in spirit. We are so many light bulbs, if you will, getting connected with an infinite generator of spirituality. It does not matter how much the devotional fellowship expands and what requirements it needs because the generator is inexhaustible.²

It is this trust that makes our relationship so sweet. It allows us to bypass the formal contours of the Guru-Chela relationship and colour it with the form of love most dear to our heart. Perhaps we look upon Guruji as our father, perhaps some of us find maternal love in him, perhaps we look to him as our elder brother, or as a dear friend. And perhaps further still, to the farthest reaches of human relationship, we think upon him as our beloved intimate. He is the first and sole occupier of our heart to whom we dedicate and offer all our passions, our will, and our quest for companionship.

It all begins with Trust. But we must layer it over with Patience. Trust and patience - *Shraddha* and *Saburi* - these are the two motifs that the great saint, Shri Shirdi Sai Baba, left with us. Over and over again, the devotee will find

that he needs either the one or the other. Sometimes he needs to trust a bit more, sometimes he needs to be more patient. An honest devotee will readily admit to lacking both.

The Guru is not interested in how perfect we are. He does not solely seek a perfect human being, some model of humanity that he is eager to work on. For perfection itself is a limited ideal. We can only be perfect as regards to things we can conceive of and dream about. But spirituality or God is beyond our idea of perfection as it is not attainable by the mind. The shabad says, “*Agam agochara tera ant na paaya.*” Time and again, the scriptures say, the Lord is unattainable by word and deed. Why? Because if he would become attainable he would become less than the person who attained him. Instead, it is the other way round. It is God who claims us. It is Guruji who claims us for our own. It is the Truth that claims us and speaks from within us.

The Truth or God or Guruji is an indivisible reality. What we call it does not matter. Small groups of people or ideas or books that proclaim that they alone have visiting rights to the highest state of being or that they alone can bring you to the Truth are suspect. Beware of such people and of such ideas.

What did Guruji tell his devotees?

- 1) All religions are the same. They all teach the same core lessons of love, compassion and the sacred unity and interdependence of all life.
- 2) Humanity is one - out of which flows compassion to your fellow man and service to all humanity.
- 3) God is one - out of which flows respect for all beings and an understanding that life itself is sacred. Out of which comes non-violence, the abjuring of all means of hurting people, whether through overt war or through the more subtle and indirect means of emotional and physical humiliation or economic and cultural subjugation and exploitation.
- 4) The value of simple, spiritual endeavour - to take some time out from our busy lives to explore our spiritual side. Guruji taught us to sever the bonds of materialism for some time daily and connect with him; to pray and meditate a little every day.

Guruji's method was simple and encompassed the paths of *karma* (selfless service), *bhakti* (devotion), and *gyan* (wisdom) even as it extolled the virtues of taking God's name. Guruji did not fashion a new creed; he fashioned

devotees of exceptional endurance and strength, with uprightness of purpose and singular loyalty.

Guruji is best remembered through the observance of his teachings. We will fully respect him only when we fully embody his teachings. At that moment, we will truly be one with our Guru, our father, our mother, our brother, friend or beloved.

The best embodiment and vehicle of Guruji's teachings are the shabads. The shabads lay down the common ground of all spirituality. They encompass the writings of the highest spiritual exponents. Shri Guru Nanak-ji of course, but also Kabir, Sant Ravidas and others. The shabads are the true expounders of spirituality. They embody the common heritage of our religions, singing the ballad of non-duality as well as voicing the yearning for devotional unity. Shabads thus play a dual role. They not only show us the path towards *darshan*, they are themselves a darshan. They are the living songs of truth. By enfolding the mystic's path to truth, they guide us to truth themselves. They are rightly the Guru themselves. We will do well to listen to them with open minds and hearts. They will sow the seeds of spiritual consciousness within us. Through trust and patience, these devotional seeds will one day bear flowers and fruits and give rise to the self-realization that is every person's claim upon himself, if he or she but recognizes it.

It is only then that Guruji's task will be done. It is when we embrace his teachings, not dogma, not narrow-isms, not slavish yoking to a rule, and when we live the truth that we will become his true disciples. It is only then that we shall be Gurumukhs in the full sense of the word. It is only then that we shall become *purna*, complete or whole, in the eyes of our Guru.

Such is Truth: A medicine that swallows us whole.

Mukti, or moksha, or nirvana, is said to be the highest aim of humankind. Mukti can be had only through the Guru's grace. In fact, there is no liberation without Grace. Following the teachings of Guruji through his shabads is a path not only for life but also for liberation. We learn not only how to live life but how to attain mukti. The devotee who fully follows his Master's bidding shall have mukti when he wants it. For him, mukti is not the goal. For him, the goal is following his Guru's teachings. Salvation is no inconsiderable achievement. In any day and age, it is rare. But *salvation can be had for the asking if the true disciple merely follows his Guru's word.*

With a Guru, salvation becomes a subordinate goal simply because the

Guru can fashion the disciple into a spiritual powerhouse who kindles the light of devotion and truth in others. That does not deny the primacy of salvation but merely elevates the supremacy of following the Guru's teaching. The teaching is first and foremost.

That is why Sant Kabir says: "*Guru, Govind done kharein; kake lagun paye, Balihari Guru apne Govind diyo bataye.*"

1. "Mira had raganuga or Ragatmika Bhakti. She never cared for public criticism and the injunctions of the shastras. She danced in the streets. She did no ritualistic worship. She had spontaneous love for Lord Krishna. She did not practise sadhana-bhakti. From her very childhood she poured forth her love on Lord Krishna. Krishna was her husband, father, mother, friend, relative and Guru. Krishna was her Prananathi."

- Swami Sivananda, Lives of Saints; <http://www.dlshq.org/books/es93.htm>; accessed December 24, 2016.

2. As the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad adroitly sums it: Purnam adah, purnam idam purnatpurnam udachyate; purnasya purnam adaya purnam evavasisyate. Take the Whole out of the Whole and the Whole still remains, subtract the Whole from the Whole and the Whole still remains.

FOUR

Prema: The discipline of love

The Guru's love is not easily recognized for what it is. It is different from the love we experience. Also, Gurus vary widely in their personalities and may not be outwardly expressive. Neither are they under any rule to behave towards us in a certain manner or conform to socially sanctioned etiquette.

Theirs is a higher form of love, seeded with wisdom, unadulterated with attachment, and unalloyed with selfishness and desire. It is difficult for a disciple to attune herself to it, because it does not come into her emotional frequency and is at a different bandwidth.

For example, if a mother tells her child not to have ice cream when he has fever, she is not trying to get in the way of the fulfilment of his trivial desire. And if a father disciplines his child for watching TV or playing video games, he is only trying to forestall a bad habit and a wastage of energies and time that are better directed elsewhere. Or if you have diabetes and a doctor tells you not to eat sweets, he does not do so out of spite. None of these actions are borne out of a wilful act of malicious intent, but out of concern and consideration for their charges.

The Guru has a similar concern and consideration, but it is much wider in scope. The Guru is a physic for the soul; he is the one appointed to take the soul back to God. He is the doctor of your soul as well as its mother and father. Or, if you prefer other terms, the Guru is the master who takes you towards self-realization. His responsibility encompasses lifetimes and his vision has to see those parts of our nature which we are either disinclined to acknowledge or are incapable of knowing. It is only after a consideration of the disciple's nature and attitude and his karmic situation that the Guru acts. So he can behave differently with different disciples in accordance with their temperaments.

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The guru does not have to act visibly or in front of the disciple. But the Guru acts for your best. It is a simple matter - yet it takes a disciple much time to understand this. We use our minds to understand what happens, but the Satguru's actions can easily stymie logic and rationality. In fact, the Guru's disciplining, his commandments to us to do this or not, his stopping us from certain things are an act of love.

The Guru gains nothing by selfless investing an entire lifetime in shaping disciples. He is already perfect. He has already attained to the Truth or God or whatever you will. He is not bound by karma to do this or that. Yet he assumes a human guise and agrees to act along in the play. He is the messenger who comes to tell you the good news about the fact of your real identity and the concomitant return of your self to its true anchorage.

Remember that the Guru gains nothing from us. He is not obligated to help us. He agrees to; he is not forced to. It is we who are obligated to the Guru forever for what he chooses to do for us. It is a superhuman task: Lifting us out of the muck of materialism and purifying us so that we can be fit enough to be disciples. That is the first of Guruji's none-too-envious task.

After we have become disciples, we then get on to plumbing the spiritual reservoir that is in each of us. Directing the spiritually fit disciple also becomes the Guru's task. In all this, there is the ever-present danger of the disciple slipping on the banana peel of his ego and hurting himself badly, losing time and momentum on the journey. The Guru teaches us to see our ego and to disarm it, to render it ineffective and minimally functional.

All this, it may be strange to say, is love. The Guru is careful about expressing his love towards you because it may inflame your ego or excite your affection so much that it strains the natural bond. The disciple may not have reached a level of maturity where he can handle the purity of the Guru's affection. Emotionalism is frequently mistook for spirituality. Yet dramatic emotionalism, especially an extroverted emotionalism on the part of the devotee, is a sign of a wilful misdirection of self. A symptom of a psychic illness, an imbalance in the mind that is routing itself through exaggerated

behaviour.

Besides disciples come to the Guru in many moods and minds. Sometimes we are happy, at other times upset. We can be alternately vulnerable and strong, confident and doubtful, full of love towards everybody or just disgruntled with the state of affairs in the world. How would we react to an emotional Guru if we have not yet learnt to take care of our own emotions?

Darshan, as it is rightly called, is seeing the Guru as the embodiment of God, or Satchitananda. What it requires is stillness of mind and steadiness of faith; both of which we have to inculcate. An excitable, hyperemotional darshan, easily accepted as devotional behaviour, may happen but is not ideal. Another danger is to see the Guru as something else, to project a private and intimate relationship where none exists. Such affections towards our Guru may be a sidelight of our relationship (and care should be taken to see that such passions are healthy and natural) but they can never be and shouldn't be the form our relationship takes towards him. We need to bear in mind always that the Guru is the highest divinity made manifest in the human form. A constant mental reminder of Guruji's stature will automatically reprove us for exhibiting excess emotional energies that are better directed inward towards raising up our level of devotion.

Some great masters exhibit spiritual states. Swami Ramakrishna Paramahansa would often pass into exalted states of devotion towards the Mother. He would put flowers upon his head as a form of worship to the divine self inside him. Yet the disciples around him were aware that they were in the presence of a manifestation of God. Hence, they were able to recognize and revere his actions and, quite possibly, these conferred spiritual blessings to them that only the Master was aware of. They were not tempted to emulate these high spiritual moods. That would be, and is, sacrilegious.

Modern-day charlatans dispense spiritual hokum. They are in contempt of the divine when they besmirch the honour of their spiritual practice, their lineage and their gurus through fake emotional parades and outright fraud. That is why today a manifestation of spirituality is readily considered suspect. Spirituality has become fashionable (again). People say they are not religious, but spiritual. Their actions speak otherwise. A consideration for humanity, kindness towards others is the very first step of spirituality, yet so many are forgetful and disdainful of it that one feels a bit of religion in their daily lives may not do them any harm.

Unfortunately, India is no longer as clear-sighted about the spirit as it always was. The veneration to holy men still exists in social life, but people want a short-cut spirituality. Umpteen pundits and astrologers can be found who can find us the quickest way out of our troubles for a hundred bucks. No one is hungry for God.

Guruji often used to say that no one came to him for the real thing, and it was his constant endeavour to direct us towards the real and the true. He well knew that everyone came to him out of materialistic want or for the resolution of some personal, physical or professional problem, but no one came to him for what he had in plenty, what he could easily give: Love for God, pure devotion towards the Satguru, unalloyed spiritual thirsting. Guruji had an abundance of that pure spiritual charge that could wake us up and turn us truth-ward or Godward irrevocably.

The Guru's love is, therefore, directed to the divine in us and not necessarily expressed emotionally. Gurus come time and again into this world to see what their flock is up to, how their disciples are faring, and - if necessary - they can wake us up abruptly. It is better to be woken up out of our material dreams and our visceral grasping for all such things that are not of the spirit by the Guru than to be crudely hurt by life.

Suffering comes to us to wake us up - especially if we have not been paying attention. Human beings are remarkably inventive at not confronting themselves, at not looking themselves straight in the mirror and acknowledging what kind of people they are. Am I greedy? Am I being loving? Am I in this for the right reasons? These are questions devotees evade day in and day out, because they may not like what the answers tell them about themselves. But these questions won't go away. In fact, it is critical to give honest answers to yourself. No one asks for a confession or for penance or guilt or some other form of self-mortification. These are stupid ways of redressing our faults. They don't, in fact, deal with any of them. The Guru does not have to be told about our faults, because he is more aware of them than us. What we need to do is know them for ourselves.

An acceptance of ourselves and others as they are gives us the wholesome benefit of peace, since our human personality is then at balance externally and internally. But this involves acceptance of our state in life, which may either be not to our liking or not completely fulfilling of all our wants. Yet in such acceptance lies the possibility of a change for the better as well as the only chance we have of redemptive peace.

The Guru makes us see that we have been the authors of our own fate. That the present is a choice that is upon us. Our investment of energies towards a spiritual state, a positive bent of mind, an amiable and amenable attitude will help us. Yet at most times, devotees rush to correct others before applying their own medicine to themselves. Others become energetic evangelists, keen on emphasizing and getting fellow devotees to fulfil so-called rules and behavioural patterns that are remote from the silent, inner expression of divinity. Often most simply turn into zealots, interested in watching others than their own selves, and descend into a narrow-mindedness that is not different from bigotry. They are often the public champions of institutions and upholders of their guidebooks.

Spirituality is a silent passion for truth. It is not an exercise that is attempted in front of the public eye. It is an intensely private affair. God, as the saints assert, should be kept in the heart as one keeps money in the pocket - away from prying eyes, minds, and mouths. It is also a spiritual truism that talking about one's spiritual practice leads to its diminution. A too-gaudy exhibition of spiritual exercises, say, a yogi flaunting physical or psychic powers, is a sure sign of fall from the true spiritual pursuit.

Sometimes the Guru lets us fall. So that we can learn, once and for all, the inadvisability of certain pursuits that we are not, after repeated cajolment, persuasion and warnings, willing to drop. Certain mental diseases require extensive surgery. This hurts, and leads to astounded protestations from the devotee. But make no mistake: The Guru carries out such operations thoroughly.

The absolute prerequisite for spirituality, therefore, is humility. It is the humble disciple who suffers the least, because he offers no resistance to his Guru. His personality is amenable to being shaped, to becoming a vehicle for his true self to shine forth. It allows the Guru's grace to come unfiltered into his being. The humble disciple gets the utmost benefit of grace because, through the perfection of his surrender, he is able to accept all of it.

It is humility that can thus get us out of all situations, because it offers no resistance to anyone. And that is why humility is a counterpart of surrender. The humble disciple has already surrendered himself, and the disciple who has not surrendered or is trying to is still in the grips of his ego.

The greatest drawback a spiritual aspirant can have is the antithesis to humility: a strong ego. A strong ego hurts awfully when it is crushed. And it takes a lot of time for the disciple to overcome that hurt and return to his

Guru's love. The Guru's love is his mercy towards us. Yet it may express itself, in some instances, unmercifully. It is at these moments of disciplining that the Guru's love is fully unmasked, because he is doing it only because he loves you. Not an abstract 'you', but you as you are.

Let us assume, however, that we are spiritual novices and we have just been brought before Guruji. We like him a lot; we can feel his affection. Yet, our mind asks, how do we entrust ourselves to a Guru, a human being. How do we know he is the one for us?

It is a good question. Shri Neem Karoli Baba, a satguru, was once asked this question by a disciple who was attracted towards a man of some spiritual attainment and wanted to learn certain spiritual practices from him. The saint, considered an avatar of Hanuman-ji, asked his disciple: Do you think that man still has desires in him? His disciple reflected upon the question and decided that the man seemed to be cultivating disciples for his own purposes and that his actions were not absent from greed. He said so to his master. Then Maharaja, as he was known, said: If he is not free from desire, how can he free you from it?

Satgurus don't cultivate disciples; don't show off; and are not prone to miracle-working even as they work wonders minute in and out. A Guru purifies his disciples so that they can witness their own lives as a play being enacted on the stage of life, in front of other actors. A few siddhis, a few extravagant insights, a giddy feeling of a passing spiritual exaltation - these are traps that Satgurus take us away from. Guruji wants us to flower to the full, beaming extent. Each of us flowers and grows according to the seed inside us. The Guru sees that seed and patiently cultivates it till it grows into what it was meant to be.

Such is the Guru's love. Not all of what we have felt as human love can be compared to it. Human love is sweet of itself - and it is a disgrace that we pay so little attention to it - and it manifests the love of the spirit that is inside each one of us. As the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* puts it: Not for the love of the wife or the husband are they dear, but for the love of the self are they dear; not for the love of the children are the children dear, but for the love of the self are the children dear; not for love of wealth is wealth dear, but for love of the self is wealth dear. Not for love of all is all dear, but for the self is all dear. The self is the one magnet on which all routes of love converge. It is this self that is to be seen.

The Self that arouses such love is God. And Gururji is that love made manifest and then expended freely on the disciple. Gururji is an incarnation of love.

However, the apprehension of this divine love is fraught with confusion. It is well brought out in the parable of the men brought blindfolded before an elephant. Each gropes about to find out what is in front. The one who catches the end of the tail thinks it is a mouse; the one who fumbles around the leg thinks it is a stout animal, like a horse. The point is that everyone comes to a partial and mistaken understanding. There are two reasons for this: One, each individual is limited in his perceptual field by what he apprehends through his senses; two, after getting sensory inputs each individual relates them to the framework of his experience. Necessarily, the individual's experience is partial, limited, biased and mistaken. The blindfold in the parable is a symbol of ignorance.

Innate ignorance combined with perceptual and experiential limitations give us false impressions. We may laugh at the men who see a mouse in an elephant, but that is so often the case with us. There is a gulf between what actually happens and what we think happens. Each one of us lives in his or her own soap bubble. What is happening changes as our thoughts and feelings overlay pure consciousness. These in turn have different triggers. It is not astounding to find as many views about a simple, objective occurrence as there are people in a room.

However, we are hell-bent on not recognizing our confusion. In its stead we claim knowledge and first-hand insights, while the contrary is true. Our wisdom is often third-hand, a mere repetition of lore passed around generationally or gleaned from books that themselves got it second-hand. First-hand experiential knowledge is hard to find. We live an eighty years if we are lucky and on the basis of this life, full of errors and regrets, dreams and circumstances, the constant striving to get ahead, to remain calm, to reduce internal disturbances, to constantly adjust our selves to those around us, to constantly conform or rebel cheaply, on such a life and an unexamined life at that, we proceed to pass judgment.

It is best to know that one does not know. It is a wholesome and healthy attitude to take. Especially, when it comes to spirituality, where we are all beginners. It is also especially healthy not to pass judgment on spiritual superiors, saints, different spiritual practices and devotional customs and rituals.

Religions codify the experiences of divinity in once-dynamic patterns. As they age, these codifications become calcified and formulaic. That does not mean that they cannot yet yield truth and are useless. That is why the phrase that we are spiritual and not religious rings hollow. Even if rituals have no meaning for us, abjure from saying so and let the person to whom they are a source of solace or meaning, carry on in his own way.

Guruji has taught us to respect all religions. Why? Because Truth or God or the Spirit is one. All mystics in whatever lands and ages attest to this fundamental spiritual unity. Shirdi Sai Baba said: *Sabka Malik Ek*. Shri Guru Nanak Dev-ji proclaimed: *Sabhan jioun ka ek data so mai visar na jai*. Mansur Al-Hallaj said: *Ana'l Haqq*. And the *Rig Veda* declared ages ago: *Ekam sat, Viprah Bahuda Vadanti*. (Truth is one: Men describe it in many ways). And nearly a century ago, Jiddu Krishnamurti said: Truth is a pathless land.¹

Of course, all of them could be lying! But they have no motive to. These *mahapurush* whose only purpose of life is to help us are not out to deceive us.

It is we who are liars. What deceives us is our own mind. It is the mind that always perceives a multitude; it sees many where one exists. It is the mind that is lazy. It is the mind that confutes and confuses. Even the heart is steady. In times of openness, through either the perception of beauty in nature, in art, in music or dance or through seeing a much-loved person, the heart expands out of the narrow confines laid down upon it by the mind and knows loves. The mind reasserts itself through questions and doubts and prefers to live within the ever-narrowing cocoon of its own perceptions. It is like a spider making its web and steadily tightening it, till we are completely deluded about our true identity.

The mind is the outer dress of the ego. It is how the ego comes out when it is going to war. Which is all that the ego ever does: it makes wars, small or large. And all our differences arise because of the ego. We need a ground to stand on; that ground is the ego. We are constantly playing a game of one-upmanship; it seems we cannot do without contrasting ourselves with others, having our say, engaging in battles, fighting each other with small-minded piety and narrow moral scriptures.

Why do we do it?

We are insecure. At the back of our hyper-speeding minds is the constant suppressed realization that we have no standing. It will all be over very soon.

Death will find a back door through the elaborate artifice we have constructed of our lives. It will not respect our wealth, it will not respect our attachments, it will not respect our thoughts, it will not respect our feelings, it will not respect anything that we have built, whether physical or emotional. It will not respect our morality, it will not respect our wish for more time, it will not respect our love, it will not respect our likes and dislikes, it will not grant us an iota of time more or less, it will not respect any of our wishes, it will neither take our apology nor our praise, it will not wait for us. It will take us.

So every minute we disregard death. Our entire psychological and social apparatus is built around avoiding death. That is why cemeteries are built well outside towns. That is why pundits say you should not have Shiva temples inside a house. Why? Because Shiva is a God who goes where no one goes. He is the God of Love. His mercy reaches the soul in the funeral pyre - and since we associate him with death and destruction, we say: Out of our houses! What a foolish conception. As if one could shoo away death! By employing such notional distances, we keep the very granter of life outside lives. We make him a pariah.

In scripture, this notional discord is embodied in the stories of Daksha and Lord Shiva. Daksha is the skilled officiant of the sacrifice. He embodies the acculturation force of civilization. Shiva is God Manifest. And God is indefinable. That is why the ancient rishis saw him or the spirit in terms of Truth, Consciousness and Bliss, Satchitananda. There is a constant friction between the socially sanctified and formally religious means skillfully employed, as it were, to mould the spirit and the nature of that spirit, which is not an object of conquest. In his hubris, which stands for the hubris of piety and the hubris of the morally righteous priests, Daksha seeks to tame the spirit. He pays the price when he knowingly forgets to revere that spirit and make a space for it. (The sacrifice is destroyed when Shakti in the form of Sati withdraws from it, for where Shiva has no place, neither will Shakti.)

Daksha also represents the ego. For the story of the failed sacrifice ends with the head of a goat being substituted in place of the priest's swollen head. And the goat goes "me", "me", "me". It symbolizes the self-centredness of the ego. The ego believes that the Guru or God is something that can be the fruit of long, pious efforts. Hence, it indulges in severe practices and mortifications.

Think of how the Buddha tried for six long years to win self-realization through increasingly difficult practices. He practiced austerities, fasting, yoga and even some modes of meditation. He came to a state of near emaciation,

when he could not go on. He was sitting below a tree when a woman, Sujata, came to offer a bowl of rice pudding to the tree deity, whom she venerated. Seeing the ascetic as an embodiment of the tree spirit, she offered it to Gautama. He accepted it. He was nourished and felt refreshed. This brought to him the insight that the spiritual path was not a way of extremes but, as it came to be called in Buddhism, the Middle Way, the path between extremes.

Our good fortune lies in the fact that we have a Guru. We have already found the guide, instead of first learning for ourselves that a guide is necessary. We have not had to spend long years in arduous error and then come to the realization that a Guru is required. After the dawn of that knowledge, we have not had to undertake a second long journey in search of a Guru, getting him to accept us and then being trained under him. The mercy of Guruji is such that he has come for us. We do not thank our good fortune because we have not laboured for it. Yet the gift of a Guru is a treasure for lifetimes.

Guruji has brought us to himself and despite our ceaseless persistence in error is keeping us with him. Why? Because he sees our potential. Because he has faith that we will find our way, that we will take to spirituality not because spirituality is an other-worldly object of attainment, full of pleasure and gratification, but because *spirituality is our nature*. It is not alien to us. God or Guru is our very own. He is not alien to us. This nature, this self, this atman, this flickering light that each one of us has, is not outside us. Not something that has to be brought inside. Not something that is found inside subterranean caves and Himalayan recesses. It is our own very nature.

And that is why God is one. Because He is our own *svabhava* or nature. If there is a difference between your God and my God, your religions and my religions, it would be best to undertake a great deal of introspection of our mental faculties and to honestly answer if these are not simply our prejudices at play.

Let us hearken then quickly to our guides. To these steady oarsmen who we call Gurus. Let's listen to them clearly. Let us hear again and again what they are saying. The great guides of God, these mahapurushs, are our sole guiding lights. We must set aside our small divisions and hearken to their allembicing message of unity: One God, one fellowship of men and womenkind, one truth.

Six centuries ago, Shri Guru Nanak Dev-ji proclaimed it as *Ek Onkar* - One Who is Omkar. The hoary Vedas said: *Ekam Sat* (Truth is One). We only

need hear them clearly and persevere.

1. “You may remember the story of how the devil and a friend of his were walking down the street, when they saw ahead of them a man stoop down and pick up something from the ground, look at it, and put it away in his pocket. The friend said to the devil, ‘What did that man pick up?’ ‘He picked up a piece of Truth,’ said the devil. ‘That is a very bad business for you, then,’ said his friend. ‘Oh, not at all,’ the devil replied, ‘I am going to let him organize it.’

I maintain that Truth is a pathless land, and you cannot approach it by any path whatsoever, by any religion, by any sect... Truth, being limitless, unconditioned, unapproachable by any path whatsoever, cannot be organized; nor should any organization be formed to lead or to coerce people along any particular path.”

- Jiddu Krishnamurti, in his speech dissolving the Order of the Star of the East, the organization formed to proclaim his role as world teacher, in 1929.

<http://www.jkrishnamurti.org/about-krishnamurti/dissolution-speech.php>
[;accessed December 24,2016.](#)

FIVE

Sewa: The yoga of selfless service

The aim and ideal of yoga is to be equipoised. To be in equilibrium not only physically - that is a gross aim - but mentally, such that we are able to arrive at same-sightedness. We look upon all equally. As the shabad puts it: *Galli jog na hoi/ ek drishti kar sab sar jane*. It is not through discussion or much reading that we come to yoga, it is through the cultivation of same-sightedness.

Shabads tell us that man is born from the divine light and invested with it. The diversity of mankind is rooted in divinity. Hence, we are one and the same. We may appear to be good or bad, to be falling into mischief or embracing righteousness. The divisions among us are of degree, not of kind. Fundamentally, the core of our selves is divine. As the shabads say: *Awwal allah noor upaya/kudrat ke sab bade/ Ek noor te sab jag upjaya/Kaun bhale kaun mande*.

Such is the attitude of the saints. We sense that cultivating this attitude requires much work, name it sainthood and excuse ourselves from it. But it is not as much an attitude as a statement of absolute reality, of the fundamental unity and interdependence of existence. That we are one and the same, that my brother is me is the basis of morality. The universe is not inclined to favour one over other, though, granted, it may appear to do so.

The Universe is neutral. It is our karmas that swing the pendulum of favour, or luck, towards or away from us. As we have sown, so shall we reap. So looking after the sowing is extremely important. What we do and why we do it is secret at times even to us, but known to existence.

We can earn immense goodwill through small, repetitive acts of selfless kindness. Or cause ourselves to head towards doom through bits of selfish, malicious acts. The results are not immediately apparent, for it takes time for momentum to be built in the swing of destiny. But once it does, the results are swift: Either a windfall or a disaster.

The Grace of the Guru is quick to our rescue. The Guru can use his

unfathomable spiritual reservoir to bring about tiny changes in the arc of the speeding swing of karma so that its worst effects miss us. Such displacement is grace. If we are truly responsive to our Guru we can escape the worst of our karmas. A blaze can become just a scar. Or as Gururji used to say: “*Suli ko sui bana diya.*” The guillotine can become a pinprick. But we cannot just wait for that to happen.

Once we go to a Guru and entrust ourselves to him, he may put us through different roles. Their purpose is known only to him. All of them can be put under the grand umbrella of selfless service, or *sewa*. *Sewa* is a means to straighten out our karmas. By being available and useful for our brother devotees, we are creating good karma. We are creating a current of goodwill and good deeds that will not only act to nullify our bad deeds but also give fruit later. But our eye must not be on the fruit or the pressing demands we have that need fulfilment or gratification immediately. Or even on the resolution of the problems that test us.

Service means patience and perseverance not physical ardour and shallow zeal alone. *Sewa* doesn't mean plunging into activity and getting in the way of others. *Sewa* is distinguished from labour. Labour is not voluntary, and always has an end in mind. *Sewa* is voluntary and forsakes reward. *Sewa* is for others not for self: That is its distinguishing mark.

Sewa is also not a quantitative measure. So many hours of *sewa* at the mandir or masjid or *gurudwara* or church does not equal so much heaps of merit earned. It is the diligence and the attitude of the devotee that is important not the hours spent.

The pursuit of the path of service is not easy, because in that the devotee makes a covenant with God or Guru to be at his disposal whenever required. The devotee surrenders his time and workmanship to God and says: “Let thy will be done through me.” With such an attitude, all of one's time can become service. One need not go to a special place of worship to engage in selfless service. If existence wants the devotee to become a means to a certain end, it will certainly use him. But at that moment you have to be available. You have to drop what you think you should be doing, what you believe is the correct course of action and simply allow yourself to become a means.

Service becomes possible only through the relinquishment of the ego. If you do service with the ego, your ego will suffer very hard. Selfless service is an antidote for the ego, a means in the hands of the Guru to break down the ego.

Guruji may allow your arrogance to increase only to uproot it when he thinks the time is right to teach you a lesson. Such falls are painful to behold, extremely difficult to recover from, and may even lead to spiritual setbacks.

At first, you may be overjoyed and very enthusiastic at getting sewa, but you may soon find - if you are in earnest about it - that many obstacles come to thwart you. There are disciples who always know better, disciples who interfere, disciples who leave their sewa to join you in yours, disciples who think sewa is secondary, disciples who cannot stand you - yet, if you have been enjoined upon by your Guru to do sewa, you need to take a deep breath and carry on. Realize that man is not the doer, the Guru is.

So just keep going. Your best friend in exacting circumstances is humility. There is no need to join arguments. There is no need for sharp rejoinders to your accusators. Remember the Guru knows what is happening and the disciples are his, not yours. You are not their Guru and any lessons that have to be taught will be - but by the Guru. Meanwhile, if everything and everyone is pressing down upon you, do not take yourself seriously. It is all a good show and you need to learn to relax and let go of things. If people are snatching your sewa away from you, if they are being competitive while doing sewa, if they are harried and getting others harried while doing sewa, let them. Such actions do not merit the name of service in the first place. And why are you worried? This is the world, and it will always be like this.

Your second-best friend while being engaged in service is humour and, hopefully - pray for it! - a troupe of happy fellow devotees with you. They are your friends, pulling your legs and egging you on. It is the attitude in which sewa is done which becomes all important. That does not mean you have to become pious all of a sudden and chant mantras under your breath. Your nerves can come under a strain if you try all of it at the same time. Just have it in your heart that you want to be of service. Earnestness is supremely important in doing service- but earnestness is different from zeal. Righteous zeal still has the disciple at the centre of actions, whereas earnestness has the task at hand as its focus. And this earnestness is nurtured and blessed by the Guru. That genuine feeling, which is a blessing from the Guru, will see to it that you do your service trouble-free.

It is not possible to enumerate the blessings that flow from sewa. Engagement in any selfless pursuit is bound to yield its results sooner or later. Selfless service can change your destiny. For it brings about an accumulation of karmic merit that writes in a golden destiny. One of the shabads says that the

selfless servant of the Guru not only liberates himself but brings others into the path and delivers them to the guru as well.

The path of service is also not the pursuit of hard labour alone. Occasion may arise for the devotee to be patient and bide his time. As the poet said: "They also serve who stand and wait." In truth, they serve better. Most people do serve only in name. They are around important people and seem to be very busy. Yet, functionally, they end up doing zilch. This is not sewa. This is a charade, and you are the one who is playing the game. You are deceiving yourself and no one else - besides being a nuisance. The law of karma is ironclad; it brings about salutary and sudden justice whenever required.

It is the primary task of the disciple engaged upon service to see that he upholds the dignity of his fellow disciples and does not, under any provocation, bring a bad name to his Guru. The Guru is not, in an absolute sense, affected by his actions. But immature disciples often act in a manner not in keeping with the standard of spirituality.

What is the standard that the disciple must uphold? It is compassion. One can err in being too kind. An error of compassion can be waived aside. It does not arise out of an intent to harm. But an error arising out of malicious intent, out of irresponsibility and vain gloriousness, out of pride, out of active intent to hurt, to cause divisiveness and misrule cannot. One must never hurt other people's hearts. Such actions quickly erode the disciple's sum of goodwill and tip it into the negative. Then the pendulum of destiny swings against us and we get hurt.

Of course, mistakes will be made. It is not that making mistakes is prohibited. Mistakes are very precious because they allow us to progress. What is not good is being obstinate and persisting in error. Disciples must undertake course corrections when they find themselves making mistakes. The Satguru does not expect us not to make mistakes, but he surely expects us to realize that we are making them and to initiate actions for not repeating them.

The yoga of same-sightedness, the ability to see friends and foes alike is a tremendous attitude to have. It is, in fact, the correct way of seeing things (because of our underlying unity). And it is completely victorious. Put this attitude to any test and it will come away smiling and easy. Because the devotee who is same-sighted is not against anything. He is not against pleasure or pain. He is not against profit or loss. He is not against friend or enemy. He is not against victory or defeat. He is not against good deeds or bad deeds. Because he

is so poised in the middle of these extremes, he finds absolute peace. He is unshakeable. His strength is infinite, because he has ceased to struggle for or against any outcome, internal or external.

It is, of course, not an easy attitude to inculcate - since one has to be extremely aware of personal mental states and external situations and their interplay. Yet since same-sightedness partakes of reality, is grounded in absolute reality, it must be innate to us. Not alien. It may be easy for our minds, bound by habits and prejudices, to replay the same old scenarios, to use ingrained attitudes as circumstances and people change, but with sufficient devotion and with Guruji's grace, we can remind ourselves that God is one and each one of us is of God.

SIX

Samarpana: Dropping the ego

As soon as we reach Guruji, we become familiar with two words: *Guru Kripa* and *Hukm*. We are told to take the Guru's *aagya*, or permission, before we leave his presence and are also made to recognize that we cannot come to him without his choice.

It seems a matter of courtesy, but the truth being expounded is fundamental. *The hukm of the Guru is the organizing principle of the disciple's life.* But what does hukm really mean? Is it a command that comes from the Guru? Is it limited to the command that comes?

In an absolute sense, hukm is the divine fiat. It is fate. It is what has been ordained. For a prescribed event to take place, it stands to logic that the steps that lead to the event also occur. Hence, hukm is not only what will happen but also the entire process through which an event happens. The entire process by which we come to a certain point, to a certain event or happenstance is a hukm. Mentally, we can divide the hukm into a command and the follower of a command. But that is just a framework, not the reality of it. In fact, hukm is the entire circle of interdependence of existence. It is how existence works through us. Not for us.

When a disciple and a Guru have formed a relationship of trust between themselves and the disciple has entrusted himself to the guru, hukm is what is ordained by the Guru, who is our beneficial guide. Hukm is how the Guru uses his power when we are in his refuge. His hukm is a means to save us. So, it is best to not be in wilful ignorance of an active command or prompt of the Guru. In fact, at the outset, it is the divine hukm that allows ourselves to develop full *shraddha* in our guru. Which then enables him to use his power to take care of our karmas.

In Shri Guru Nanak's *Japuji*, hukm is the existential law of the universe, of each and every being and particle. It is as pervasive as the law of gravity. It is what we call *niyati*. Abiding in the hukm leads the spiritual aspirant to truth and tears down the fortress of falsehood.

What is the best way to follow Guruji's hukm? To surrender totally to life. We should be in total agreement with what is happening, with whatever that is. We should float on the current of life, no matter where it takes us. We should maintain total acceptability towards what is happening and be in acquiescence, and not in blatant disregard, towards what is happening.

This is also the central commandment of the *Ashtavakra Samhita*, the centuries-old great *Advaita* dialogue on realization and liberation between Saint Ashtavakra and his disciple, the liberated sage-king Janaka. Ashtavakra says that the illumined rishi is like the yellow leaf that falls from the tree. The leaf is not even green; its desires have been vanquished long ago, it has no wishes of its own. Hence, it does not project upon the world its will. It goes where the wind takes it. It does not say I want to go right, when the wind - that is, circumstances at a certain point - is blowing left. It takes no standpoint. It is neither for nor against anything. It initiates nothing and it stops nothing. The fully illumined, liberated-while-living (*jivan mukta*) sage is neither for the world nor against it. The sage merely leaves it to the will of existence.¹ (For existence we can substitute God or Guru or life or Truth or whichever term we most like.) The fundamental unity of the principle of acquiescence is such that it makes no difference which term we substitute. Acceptability is important. Total acceptance is the law of spirituality. Total acquiescence. Complete harmony with what is happening.

There is a small clue through which we can recognize whether we are in alignment with hukm in our lives. Peace and natural happiness, or even the shadow of peace, means we are following hukm. Unrest, or disturbance, means we are not.

Good fortune and ill luck are both ordained via the hukm. Acceptance of both leads to same-mindedness. Samemindedness begets peace. Peace means the mind is fully calm. And in serenity, reality is seen.

The ego and its sense of doership go out of the house of our being through the door of surrender and obedience. What acceptability, or obedience, denies to us are the demands made upon us by our desires, which are projections of our ego. As the ego relaxes its grip, our karmas are worked out quickly and efficiently. Roadblocks and traffic jams still come on the way, for the disciple acts in fits and starts like a stubborn mule, ignoring the command of existence (which is one facet of your Guru), but gradually the ego weakens.

Being with the Guru we invariably come upon situations and events where

we do not want to follow his silent bidding. Yet our obstinacy is to no avail and will be harmful. Shri Paramahansa Yogananda puts it beautifully: "With what velvet glove of every humility has He not covered the iron hand of omnipotence!" Hukm is another way of describing omnipotence. Life is gently, subtly coaxing us. Life is telling us to go here or there because we are one with it. And the path of self-aggrandizement, of exploitation of the other to benefit ourselves, is against the interdependence of existence. It is a sin.

Following the Guru's word is not only great spiritual counsel. (That may seem obvious.) But it is also excellent practical advice. Very few of us are born with the insight and attention required to remove the cloak of falsehood from the face of reality. Our senses are lulled, provoked and made dull by pleasure. We function on auto-pilot mode, reacting to pleasure and pain, praise and calumny, good fortune and ill-luck. Hence our minds lead us astray. We either believe we are victims or conquerors and, at other times, we are just uncertain.

For dull beings such as most of us, following the Guru's word takes us to safe harbour. It makes up for the deficit of attention that we inculcate. The guru's word warns us, prods us, cajoles us, shows disciples the right choice and the right direction. Following it implicitly secures us against the sorrow that we have sown by not following the dharma of life: acceptance. The path to maturity can be very painful if we go along the direction set upon by our ego. Worldly successes can give us material riches and social prestige, but they take us far away from the spiritual path of inner realization. On the path of the world, downfall is certain - not necessarily materially, but in terms of losing out on what our heart was yearning for. To the serial material acquirer, a time comes when he forgets his heart. His emotional psyche becomes layered with the plaque of material acquisitions and clogged with desires. Desire that seems to give him pleasure actually chokes his life out.

The pain, when it finally comes, through loss - perhaps of the only well-wisher in his or her life, the one who loves him, or through material bankruptcy - is too keen. It breaks the worldly man. But it is by then too late to change the course of one's life. Hence, the material body is overthrown and another granted, according to the direction of the cumulative vectors of subtle desires that are in the psyche. Then the game begins anew.

It is the grace of God that can bring man out of a spiritual coma. As the shabads have it: *Je simre tin aap simraye*. A man turns Godward only if God wants him to. The spiritual urge is fostered by the spirit itself! It is the spirit inside us that is eager to complete and consummate its journey. Creatures such

as us, identifying ourselves with flesh and thoughts, cannot. The spirit inside us is fine; it is we who are in its way.

The shabads put it succinctly, advocating that the disciple disarm his psyche before the spirit: *Jo toprem khelan ka chaho, sir dhar tali gali meri aao*. It is not the physical head that has to be placed at the altar of the Guru, but the psyche which has to be surrendered at the feet of the Guru so that his love can enter and touch our soul. Then our soul uplifts the whole of us.

However, even the noblest of enterprises are fraught with the danger of doership. We may have been able to acquiesce to the Guru and an instant later are caught up in thinking that we have done it. But the Guru makes the disciple aware that it is only through Guru Kripa that this stage of obedience has been attained. Not through self-effort, but through his mercy. It is through his mercy that we are able to follow his hukm and ditch our stubborn ego.

Therefore, the small yet vital discipline of taking the Guru's aagya while leaving his presence encapsulates the highest principle: Let my life obey the dictates of my guru. Let God's will be done.

Hukm, or the divine fiat, is different for everyone. It does not mean that some are being given, while others are being denied. An ocean can easily take in the onrushing rivers, a river is fed by its tributaries, and a lake by underground wells and streams. Push a river into a lake and there will be a crisis. Of similar pattern is our relationship with what the divine fiat gives us. And it gives us far more than we need, provided we retain our gratitude towards it. Existence is not miserly. Existence has forever been giving and granting and will continue to do so.

God does not favour the winning side; He does not repudiate the losers. He is without fear and favour - *Nirbhau* and *Nirvair*. But, yes, there is grace or Guru Kripa. Grace, too, is not dispensed on certain people and withheld from others. The vehicle of Grace, the source through whom Grace comes is the Guru. And the Guru himself is non-personal. He too is *Nirbhau* and *Nirvair*. He has no identity of his own. He has completely merged into God. So that it is merely a matter of terms to speak of God and Guru as two different identities. At a relative level, Guru is God made manifest.

The Guru favours no one disciple over others. His grace is on all. The Guru is the compassionate embodiment of God. Grace is his very nature. It is not as if he is going to stop it for some and manufacture it for others. Disciples make a great mistake when they try to measure grace based on what can be most

easily seen: material prosperity. But grace cannot be evaluated.

Grace is a transformative medicine that the Guru gives. Prosperity can be one of its manifestations, but it is a side-benefit, not the whole of it. The only work of grace is to kill our ego. Grace is a subtle presence - for everyone. So it works in mysterious ways. Grace keeps us in accordance with the hukm of the creator. And the nearer, the better we follow the hukm, there is more grace for us. Following the Guru, following his hukm becomes a way to redress the imbalances arising out of our ego. Surrender to the Guru is nothing more than surrendering to life. It is an act of non-resistance, and it requires courage and humility because life does not reveal itself. It is, therefore, over the bridge of trust and grace that surrender is possible.

All the arguments of the disciple and his grievances, mighty or small, can be put in front of that huge oak door that says 'SURRENDER' - without budging it an inch. The disciple does not so much have to realize the error of his ways when the opportunity presents itself for surrender as to find his humility and hand over his ego.

Life is one. There is a fundamental unity of life, of existence. Otherwise, the universe would be ripped apart. Seeing this unity and beauty of life is prayer. *Prayer is abidance in love.* Prayer arises when we see the sacred. But it is not as if the sacred is appearing one moment and disappearing the next, becoming devalued through time. It is we who are unable to abide in love or joyful acceptance. We bring about our fall of being from the sacred to the pedestrian, to the commonplace tedium of joy and sorrow, when we fail to see the unity of life and our interdependence with all of existence.

Our prayers should be a recognition of the sacred in life; yet so very often they are simply tasks we set out for God to do. It should be the opposite: We should prostrate before this sacred life in the fullness of our acceptance, or surrender, as we prostrate before sacred beings.

Surrender means an acceptance of things as they are. A bowing to the knowledge of life's utter poise. Surrender means we are able to say: I do not understand what is happening right now, but I trust that this moment is true to life. I do not know whether what I am doing is right or wrong, but I trust that life knows and that existence will take care of it.

When we surrender, we allow existence to flow through us. We allow life to carry out its business of creation, preservation and destruction through us rather than stand in the way. Our ego is like a rock in the river of life. Sooner or

later it will be whittled down to nothing. It is much better to let life flow through us. A policy of non-interference, of non-intervention is a form of surrender.

A Guru makes it easy to surrender, because we can find it hard to trust to life, which can feel somewhat abstract. So the Guru says: “OK, no worries, you leave it to me.” We find it easier to surrender to a Guru because we have developed reverence and confidence towards him. We have experienced ourselves that he takes care of us and protects us. Hence, we leave things in his hands and stand back.

Yet we have surrendered ultimately to existence itself. We have said: “OK, I am not sure about this, but you take care of it - or don't.” Chances are we will find that existence somehow solves it for us. Life is very self-adjusting. It balances everything out. Quickly and easily too, provided we leave our obstinacy aside and are prepared to be humble.

Because Grace stays where there is humility.

As the shabad has it - and this is why shabads are Guruji's teaching for all - the rain of grace is falling at all times on everyone, but the high peaks and mountains are left bereft of it for the rain water runs away from them. The abundant waters of grace are collected by the humble alone.

Humility lies in knowing the true identity of our interdependent selves. It is not courteousness of manners and civility of speech. Humility means knowing one's place. Not social space, but knowing our place in the scheme of things, in the grand order of the universe. Our personalities are for a time and space and will soon die. Our ego, our projected desires will need other bodies and find them. This sense we have of a separate self is entirely mischievous and leads to great discord.

Humility must be an essential condition of disciple-hood. Not piety, not will, not strength, not emotional wretchedness or exaltation, not moral superfluity, but humility.

But how does one manufacture humility out of an ego? Does one merely see the ego and become aware of its enormous self-centredness, its greed, its hunger? Does one become aware of it in certain peak moments or in crises? Can it show itself in every action? And can merely seeing the ego lead to humility?

Life celebrates contradictions. The person who can attest to being besieged by hunger is not hungry: he is aware of hunger. The person who is aware of his ego is not the egoist: he is simply aware of his ego. The way out, thus, lies in not identifying with the ego and with your desires - that is what is meant by the non-observance of the ego. The Guru again makes it easy for us. He becomes a means through which we can surrender our ego and desires and be done with them.

Humility lies in knowing that this very urge for abandoning the ego or, to put it in terms of faith, developing a devotional no-self, does not arise from self-made factors. It is a huge gift that comes from the arms of the Guru, the supreme master of existence. But humility is not knowing alone. It is a feeling of fitting oneness with existence; a lack of claim-making; a withholding of self-centredness; an epiphany of the many-sidedness and many-colouredness of this grand play. Humility is like the salt in the dish: essential, invisible and just so. There is nothing like too much of humility or too little of it. Humility is the flowering of self-surrender. It is the creation of that space into which the Guru pours himself. It is what makes spiritual combustion, the lighting of the one lamp of enlightenment by the other, possible. Humility is simple, restful being.

For the spiritual aspirant, the very first dictum is nonobservance of the ego. The ego is merely the name we give to ourselves acting or observed as a unitary presence. Note that the disciple is not encouraged to fight with his ego. Because who will fight with the ego? Will not in fighting the ego, we play to its tune? If we light a greater fire to subdue a smaller one, the smaller one will be extinguished, but what will happen to the greater fire? It will go on burning, fiercer than before. And it will need more fuel. It will manufacture more desires, more needs and wants, more hurts and emotions to keep itself going. Hence if we straight away confront our ego, we will end up simply feeding and enlarging it. This is a misdirected and harmful approach.

To non-observe the ego means not to fall in for temptation. To be aware of what it wants and to nimbly get out its way. It is here that Gururji is our greatest support - provided we have developed *shraddha*, or trust, in him. Then the Guru can come to our aid. We can soothe our urges by placing them before Gururji and knowing he will take care of them when the time is ripe - or not. Because assuredly not all of our demands need to be met.

Without a Guru, it is impossible to let go of the skein of desires through which the ego holds us. The Guru enables us to let go of all that annoys, threatens and, in a word, disturbs us. We can drop sorrow at the feet of our

Guru, and we can even drop happiness, thus, readying ourselves for the state beyond sorrow and happiness.

The other benefit of letting go of things is that we have no knowledge of our karmic footprint. We do not know whether the next throw of dice on the snake-and-ladders board of life brings us to a ladder or places us before a python's swallowing tongue. Guruji does. Hence, when we leave our claims before him - no matter how just or deserving - we allow him to dispense of our karmas quickly, efficiently, and most important, in a protective manner. For we do not know what we have sown in the huge, wandering journey our ego has made of the spirit's movement towards its sole creator.

Hence the primacy of letting go, and its complementary spiritual practice of not giving in to the ego, or non-observance of the ego. That is, in other words, taking a fast from the ego.

It is ego that is behind all our actions, moral or immoral, and hence we accumulate merit and demerit. Acting without the ego, engaging in selfless action, cancels out sin and, even, virtue. Because if there is no doer of the action, there is no one to take its merit or demerit. We merely allow existence to do what it will through us. Hence we become willing participants, and joy flowers in us. Not the joy of getting something we want, but the joy of being like a leaf on the great tree of truth, which generates its own wind and gets its leaves to sing what it would.

The guru does not want us to relinquish wealth or family or power but to realize that they are not for us. A family is fulfilled through us and material wealth can be distributed through us. We are means, parts of existence, not selfish ends in themselves. We are blades of grass on the earth to whom water comes when the season wills. We are not asked to make small fences around ourselves and claim a part of the earth for ourselves and our kin. No, this material world is the property of the spirit, to whom it will eventually return. We have been allowed to make our little nests here, but we have no right over them. No sovereignty resides in us, and our wars and sleazy manipulations turn the arrow of our deeds back into ourselves.

There is no escaping our fate, for what we have snatched out of others' hands through our greed will be taken away from us. And what we have given out of the fullness of our heart shall return to us - manifold.

Following the Guru's precepts does not mean that we follow a strict scheme of socially condoned morality, of assiduous diligence to righteousness,

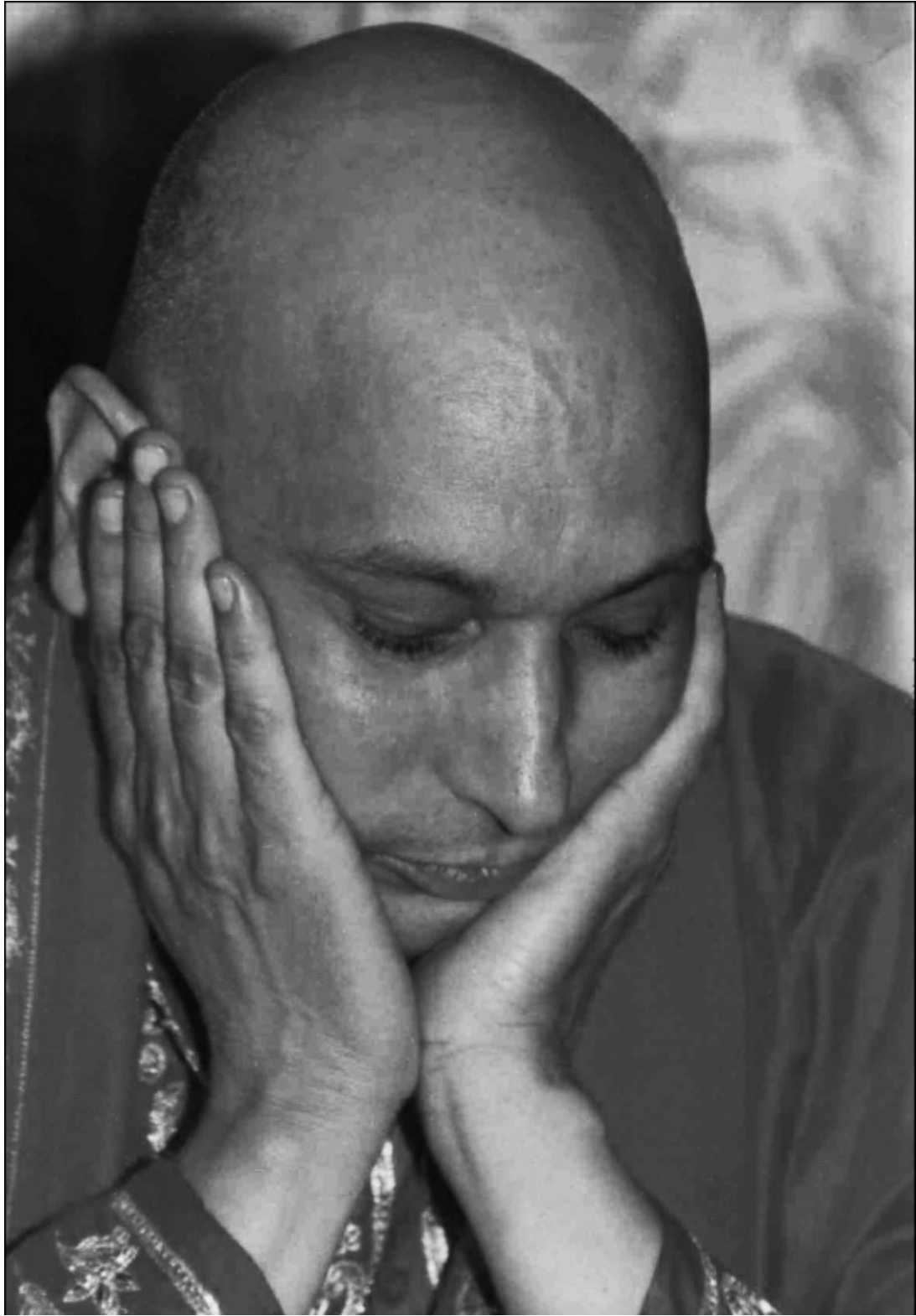
of yoking ourselves to outer disciplines and mortifications. The Guru leads us to first-hand, ready knowledge derived from experience, not something filched from the scriptures. The Guru's teachings leads the disciple to *sahaj dharma* or natural dharma - it is what a disciple comes to by himself. It is the understanding he develops as he follows his Guru.

Prostrations to the Guru who sows, nurtures and grants the gift of self-realization to his devotee.



1.

निरवासनो, निरालम्बः, स्वछंदी, मुक्तबन्धन ।
शिप्ताह संसार वातेन चौषठतते शुष्क परनक्त ॥



SEVEN

Darshan: At Guruji's lotus feet

Mortality is our common fate. Men and women have various beginnings and varied ends. But God is unborn and without parentage. Yet he does manifest. It is as if the director of a picture decides he wants to take part in his own film. So he creates a role for himself and steps in. He picks up a time and chooses a sequence of events, of course, and then he drops in to the cosmic picture to forever change it with his *leela*, or sport.

Thus was Shri Guruji Maharaj born in the hamlet of Dugri in 1952. Dugri is a village of the Punjab, nearly 90 kilometres from Chandigarh, but closer to the *tehsil* of Malerkotla. History tells us that Malerkotla was the recipient of a singular blessing.

It was the nawab of this then-Mughal state who denounced the barbaric order passed against the sons of the tenth Sikh Guru, Shri Gobind Singh. It is said that the guru blessed the nawab's house, and Malerkotla has remained a bright spot of amity among communities.¹

Accounts of Guruji's early life are sparse in detail and coloured by legend. He was born to a humble, farming couple who lived from the sustenance of the land. But his birth was extraordinary in one detail. Village folk recount that it was attended to by serpents, who later disappeared. Everything else was apparently normal, and nothing foretold how momentous this event was. Who can tell who was in attendance at the moment the spirit of Shiva himself wore human cloth? These are not details knowable to mortal men.

The script that Shri Guruji had chosen was ordinary and yet, magic shown through the rustic and poor cloth he had wrapped it in. Once as a child, during playtime, Shri Guruji fell inside a village well - but the waters bestirred themselves to deliver him right back. A little older and he would frequently blow into classmates' dry fountain pens to fill them up with ink.

Guruji studied at the local village. He showed an unnatural interest in spirituality. He is believed to have frequented the gatherings of a nearby saint.

His playmates report that he engaged in meditation while others put their energies into sport. Shri Guruji himself told his devotees that he had gained full control over his desires at the age of eight years - an age at which boys have not yet weaned themselves from toys.

Much was a foot spiritually then, but we know little. As a youth, Guruji completed a Master of Arts each in Economics and Political Science, surprising teachers with his proficiency in the subjects. During examinations, he would reproduce answers with literal accuracy, even though the teachers knew he had not been present, entirely, in their classes. His father once came to the university on a parental visit and was amazed to find him surrounded by friends, eagerly supplicating him to tell the future. Yet the entire stance of his teachings was against any mumbo-jumbo, whether ritualistic or intellectual, and to be with him was to be fully aware of the highest value he placed on the role of the Guru as guide, protector, and friend to the spirit of the disciple he was always trying to lead to its highest goal.

Then he walked him away from his beloved Punjab. There are no known witnesses to these years, but stories. Some say he went to Mumbai, wandering like the commonest mendicant, putting himself at the mercy of the street and its infrequent charity. But he did return to the Punjab, which became the first catchment area, if you will, of his sangat. He was in Jalandhar till the early 90s, from where he would move back to Chandigarh and also to Panchkula.

Shri Guruji's feet graced New Delhi in 1995 when he came for a short stay in the Greater Kailash area. (The inaptness of the name earned the area a jibe - gutter Kailash!) He returned to Delhi a few years later, this time settling down in Empire Estate, a housing colony on the Delhi-Gurgaon road.

He was known throughout simply as 'Guruji'. That was the name he ascribed to himself. If a devotee ever made so bold as to ask for his given name, he would always say that *mahapurushs* had no name, thus pointing to the reality of the spirit that he was rather than the personality he had put on.

Heeding the silent call of the Guru, many came to His feet. The youthful-looking saint was their guru; however, his guise was such as to escape the most penetrating eye. A saint came to him once, proudly bearing the heritage of the Himalayas. When tea was brought before the Himalayan sage, he refused it, claiming his libation came directly from the *Sachkhand*. Guruji asked for a glass and on it poured the heavenly elixir from the Sachkhand, coloured in varying flavours. The saint immediately threw himself at Guruji's feet.²

Unknown to the saint, Guruji had made the commonest things the vehicles of his beneficial energy. He had a passion for feeding people right from his early days. He would often bring itinerant saints and holy men into his house, asking his mother to feed them. His devotees knew that the water, tea, and langar being offered in his presence were holy prasad, blessed with healing potency. A clear recognition of the role he played, that of the Satguru who looks out for those who took refuge under him, led later to the practice of langar, already enshrined in the Sikh faith and in the saints' *bhandaras*. Everyone who came to him was fed, often to happy surfeit.

The practice carries on at the temple he built in Delhi, Bade Mandir, which devotees throng in tens of thousands. The Bade Mandir has a Shiva linga as its cupola, below which is a meditation hall. Every day it plays host to Guruji's timeless durbar where the richness of the spirit is welcomed, honoured and supplicated with the shabads - the jewel of Guruji's precious instructions - that sing their paeans of love to Lord Shiva.

Devotees, old, new (and still to come) can attest to the many blessings - of physical healing, of protection, of spiritual rebirth - that came to them simply from partaking of the holy langar and the spiritual nourishment of the shabads. The shabads and the langar provide soil, sunlight and water for the devotee's soul, which is hidden under the imperatives of the mind, body and heart. Slowly the disciple blooms. His life is transformed, internally, under Guruji's care. Shiny materialism is exposed to show that it has only rusting pleasure to offer and simplicity comes to the fore with its fraternal virtue, humility. The devotee finds himself part of the family of his guru, the sangat, even as his atrophied love for humanity is regained.

The sangat is not based on bonds of blood but on common love for the Guru. In fact, it was Guruji who patiently wove the sangat together, discarding all inequalities that man is born to. Through the years, Guruji fashioned disciples and showed them how to live and aim for the supreme, his love effortlessly knitting the devotees together into one caring, loving whole. Guruji treasured his sangat. For him no one was either high or low and he called them, no matter what their age, uncle and auntie. Guruji was never happier than when he was with his devotees: the sangat was the apple of his eye and he worked tirelessly for and on his disciples till the very end.

Guruji stayed in Delhi till his departure from his physical form in May 2007. By that time, his simple message expounded in the heartfelt shabads had reached and healed countless devotees, most of whom were ordinary people

wending their way through the samsara of family lives. To them he provided supreme protection, extraordinary love, and the happy uplifting grace of Lord Shiva.

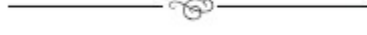
But he was unknown as a public figure. He shunned publicity and though the fact of his supreme divine being was never secret to his fold, it never came out in the open either. His giant spiritual stature and his true identity remained hidden to the public eye, but were familiar to the common devotee.

Today, we find Guruji in our hearts, in the many instances of his ever-present Grace. He answers today, as before, the call of every devotee. He never left us and never will and confers now as then “Blessings Always!”



1. When Aurangzeb decided to kill the two sons of Shri Guru Gobind Singh, the Nawab of Malerkotla opposed the move. The Guru, learning of the Nawab's defiance, blessed the town, proclaiming that “its roots shall remain forever green”. Notably, no communal clash has been witnessed in this tehsil. Source: <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2006/20060819/saturday/main1.htm>; accessed December 23, 2016.

2. I have been fortunate to hear the very few incidents recounted here of Guruji's life. As they pass from devotee to devotee, they can change – out of enthusiasm for partaking of Guruji. As such, these incidents constitute not a verifiable biography – for there can be none of an avatar, who is wholly spirit – but satsang.



जपु तपु संजमु धृमु न कमाइआ ।
सेवा साध न जानिआ हरि राइआ ।
कहु नानक ह्रम नीच करंमा ।
सरिण परे की राखहु सरमा ।

- *The Rehraas Sahib*

Bereft of devotion to your name,
Ardent practice or self-restraint
Ignorant of service to the holy
Accustomed (says Nanak) to low petty deeds
O Hari, king of my heart!
I seek your refuge -
Uphold my honour

