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Inner Flame

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

How the unseen hand of destiny shapes each individual - to undertake his unique mission, in the course of his earthly sojourn - is indeed unfathomable. How else can you explain the evolution of an introvert boy from an obscure Himalayan village into a master of Yoga, who observed a vow of silence throughout his adult life, while establishing a magnificent world-class meditation centre in the heart of one of the most prosperous states in the United States of America, the richest country on the planet? Such is the inspiring story of Bābā Hari Dāss, who established the Mount Madonna Meditation Center in Santa Cruz Hills, California. This story is brought to you under our series 'The Beacons' by Dakshu Mansukhani. It assures us that all of us are meant to do our bit sincerely, to fulfil the master plan of the divine.

Have you ever seen a boat moving in a river? However much the oarsman tries, under the influence of the tidal currents that run below the surface, the boat often gets pulled in a totally different direction. The powerful force of the undercurrents is unseen by the naked eye, but nevertheless, it has an overpowering influence on the course taken by the boat. Similarly, our limited intellects process information supplied by the sense organs (seen phenomena), and cannot even begin to comprehend how the lives of mortals are guided by the cosmic forces. 'Devotion to the Lord' is one such emotional bond, that often manifests in a sudden gush of grace, and miraculously changes the course of the devotees' lives. In his article under the series 'Perceiving Phoenix', Swāmi Chidānandaji brings out the nature of this transformational power, with the help of myriad examples from the lives of champions of *bhakti*, such as Saint Tulasidās and Saint Purandaradāsa.

Under 'Places that Beckon', Ratna Viswanath takes us to a temple dedicated to the deity Māsāni Amman (Mother of the burial ground), located near Pollachi town in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. A unique and fascinating tradition of worship of the Goddess in her fiery form, similar to that of Goddess Kāli, is observed here.

Swāmi Akhandānanda Saraswati Mahārāj examines the illusion of 'doership', which is at the very centre of suffering in worldly life, and declares emphatically, "Renounce the ideas of the illusory doership/ enjoyership, and you stand liberated here and now, while alive."

Finally, there is a poem by Kabir, where he asks us to go to the wise sages, who have realized the truth within, to get guidance on how to access 'the precious pearl of joy' hidden within each of us.

Hope this collection of noble thoughts raises our mundane lives to a level above the reach of worldly suffering, and helps us absorb the subtle fragrance of wisdom through intuitive contemplation.

Cdr HC Guruprasad (IN, Retd)
For Swāmi Chidānanda

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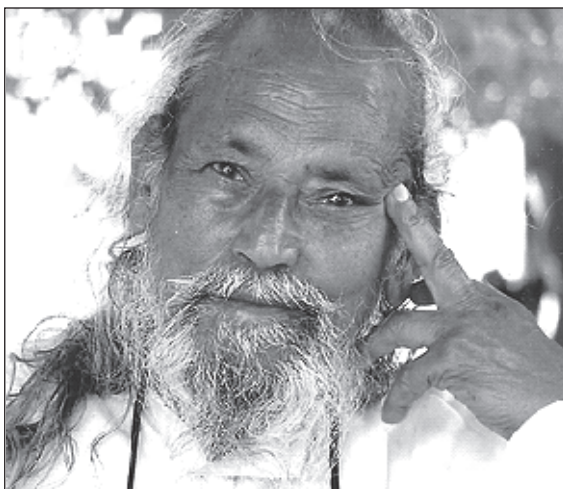
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The Silent Yogi

“Work honestly, meditate every day, meet people without fear, and play.” This was the dictum of this *sādhu*. As a teacher, he led by example. Once he was asked, “How do you accomplish everything you do?” He replied, “I have my discipline and I stick to it, as closely as I can.” In the many years of construction and development at Mount Madonna Center, California, USA (which he founded and built), he would arrive promptly on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, to conduct classes, keep appointments, and lead work crews. He inspired play in the form of evening volleyball games after work days, musical performances, and by playwriting. His plays were educative comedies about the search for liberation in a world of illusions and unprincipled

opportunism.

Affectionately called Bābā (Father), Hari Dāss was a silent monk, whose life of discipline, yoga and love has inspired people around the world. He was, first and foremost, a master yogi, having practised the disciplines of yoga from childhood. The peacefulness that he exuded, served as a lifelong example for others. It encouraged his followers in being regular in their practice of his teachings. “The aim of life is to attain peace. No one can give us peace. We can’t buy or borrow it. We have to cultivate it by practice.” Coupled with work, meditation and play, interacting fearlessly with people, he arrived at another in-depth observation: “There is an unspoken language. It comes from silence, and can’t be heard by the ears, only by the heart.” He took a vow of silence at the age of 29, a *mauna-vrata* which, he said, is a “process of self-purification by introspection.” He remained silent, till he passed away.

A yoga master, silent monk, builder of temples, and commentator on Indian scriptural tradition of *dharma* and *moksha*, he was trained in classical *Ashtānga Yoga*, *Rāja Yoga*, as well as in *Kriyā Yoga*, *Āyurveda*, *Sāṅkhya*, *Tantra*, *Vedānta* and Sanskrit.

Life in a box – the early years

Bābā Hari Dāss was born in Almora,

Uttarakhand, India on 26th March 1923, in a traditional Brahmin family. He was one of four brothers and two sisters. He left home at the tender age of eight. To the local population of Nainital and Almora, Bābā Hari Dāss was also known as Haridās (servant of Lord Hari), Haridās Bābā, Chotā Mahārāj (the little great king), or simply as Harda.

His early childhood years were marked by sadness and the feeling of separation: *“When I was small, about five-six years old, I began to feel unhappy and sad inside. That sadness would be enhanced at the sunset in the Himalayas...A feeling of separation would come, and I would feel like I was closed inside a box, where it is dark. The dome of the sky and the earth at night would make me feel like I was inside the box. ‘How can I get out of this box?’ was my constant question.”* His parents were puzzled by his strange behaviour of leaving the house early in the morning, and refusing to go back into the house. He also did not like to go to school, or to learn reading and writing. However, his father was a tough disciplinarian and very set in his own ideas. He was also a Sanskrit scholar. Haridās was forced to learn and memorize Sanskrit grammar and prayers. Around 1931-1932, his father died of a heart attack at the age of 56. This event shook the whole family, but somehow, also brought a feeling of relief. The biggest pressure lifted; Harda was free to do anything he wanted. He, however, assumed more responsibilities by helping his mother in farming, taking care of the cows, or thrashing grains. In

addition, he had to go to school and do his homework.

The pull of the ochre robes

He was attracted to the freedom that monks had in their lifestyle, free from excess of clothing, unburdened by work, and not having to attend school. *“Whenever any monk would come to the village temple, I would go to see him; I started living like a monk.”* One day, when his mother came home, she found him sitting in the room, wearing only a loin cloth, with wood ash smeared all over his body. She said, “Son, there is no happiness in the world, there is no peace in household life. I know you are very attracted to the life of a monk, but that is not an easy task either.” Young as he was, he had several conversations with his mother about God, the soul and peace. His view of the surrounding world - as being a restraining box, made of the earth as the bottom, and the sky as the top - brought him to tears. He decided that the burden had to be lifted. He made his conviction known to his mother, and asked her to release him from the confinement of ‘this box of earth and sky.’ To that, she simply said, “I can’t.” Managing to persuade his mother, he left home at the age of eight. He joined an ashram for young yoga practitioners in the jungles of Kumaon, where he was initiated into *brahmacharya*. A regimented daily schedule included six hours of sleep, getting up at 4 am, walking a mile in the dark and taking bath in a river, regardless of the season or weather conditions, a teacher-guided group study at school, homework and

preparing for exams. This lifestyle was based on the understanding that we can train our bodies in any way we want. It included daily duties of manual labour, carrying water from a river in the valley, collecting firewood, cooking, cleaning and gardening. He practised and became proficient in martial arts, *Hatha yoga*, *shatkarma-s* (Yogic purification techniques, which are said to remove toxins, which may be blocking the flow of *prāna* in the body), *mudras* (literally, gestures that produce joy and happiness) and Sanskrit. One day, their *brahmacharya* school teacher left; nevertheless, the well-disciplined young boys decided to continue on their own, with their daily regimen and with their studies for school requirements.

Learning from many masters

Pursuing his interest in the 'monk-lifestyle', he contacted travelling *sannyāsins* in temples or in public engagements, in order to imbibe their wisdom and inquire about yoga techniques, even though some of those early encounters fell short of his expectations. For example, trying to learn about the life of a Nāgā Bābā, became a debacle: the mischief that the other boys engaged in, throwing stones or disturbing the monk's meditation, etc., resulted in cursing, angry outbursts and a chase. From this experience of the disapproval he received from the older monks, Hari Dāss concluded that '*older people simply became a hindrance for youngsters.*'

A *sannyāsin*, who particularly attracted his attention, was Udāsi Bābā, known for

his tales of subduing ghosts - tales which he created, for those who believed in ghosts. For the 12-year-old *brahmachāri*, these encounters, in fact, resulted in diminishing attraction for a monk-like lifestyle.

On the other hand, at that youthful stage, Haridās got interested in the lectures given by a Swāmi Nityānanda Mahārāj, even though he, Haridās, did not understand English. Though content to just observe the ascetic form of the Swāmi, a follower of the Shiva order, who was on a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash, wearing a tiger skin and using a trident staff, it raised in him questions and confusion about God, as he believed God could create and control everything.

However, in the following year, in 1936, after attending classes of Swāmi Satyānanda Giri of Dashanāmi Sannyāsi Sect (founded by Jagadguru Ādi Shankarāchārya), Hari Dāss became so well versed in the practices and use of *Hatha Yoga*, that the older Swāmi asked the young *brahmachāri* to demonstrate what he knew; Swāmiji was surprised and pleased to see well-developed postures, *mudrās*, etc., which the *brahmachāri* demonstrated. Swāmi Satyānanda Giri asked him to teach the others in the class, who were all adults. Due to that teaching experience, which was well received by the adult learners, his feeling of 'a misfit in the class' and his shyness dissolved. "***If you work on Yoga, yoga will work on you,***" Bābā Hari Dāss is quoted as saying.

That same year, he had *darshana* of Ānandamayi Mā, as a young woman in

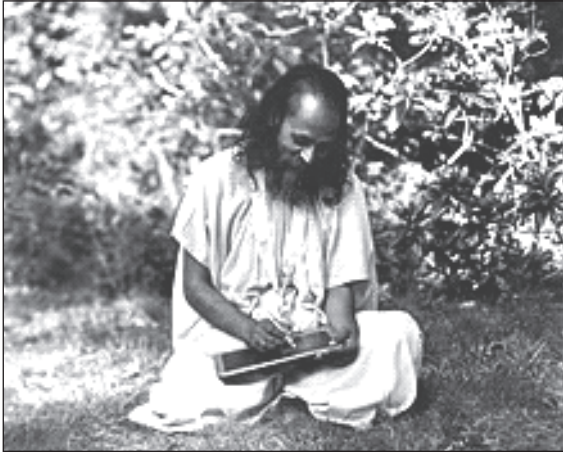
samādhi. Subsequently, he listened to a lecture by a pundit, who invoked the *Yoga Sutras*, to interpret her state of consciousness, and how *samādhi* brings knowledge of God. Intrigued, he discussed his understanding with an older colleague, and was discouraged from viewing *samādhi* as an emotionally induced trance that could occur during devotional singing/ *kirtan* or dancing. In contrast, he was told that through formal training, practice of *prānāyāma* and *dhyāna*, *samādhi* could take deeper roots. In that discussion, the issue of renouncing the world was raised. Becoming a *sannyāsi* had the consequences of radical departure from social norms, as compared to a householder's life: *If everyone renounces the world, then one day, all the old generation will die out, and there will be no new generation*. He agreed that such a statement was quite right; however, since everyone is not meant to be a renunciate, the natural balance will still be sustained, by householders performing duties for the world. He felt good about that view, and did not lose his attraction for a life of renunciation. Consequently, he was initiated into *sannyāsadeekshā* at the age of 19 years, and then in 1942, into the Vairāgi-Tyāgi Vaishnava order of the Rāmānandi Sampradāya (of Saint Rāmānanda) by his guru, Bābā Raghobar Dāss Mahārāj, a reclusive *sādhu*, who also taught Sanskrit, and who told him, "*First find unity within, in your thoughts, words and actions, and the unity outside will follow you.*"

The Vow of Silence

In 1852, Herman Melville wrote: *Silence is the only Voice of our God*. In 1952, Bābā Hari Dāss took a vow of *maunavrata* or silence. He would jot his thoughts succinctly on a small chalkboard, when he wanted to communicate. Since long, *maunavrata* has been accepted as the ultimate *sādhanā* for purification. Even though continued silence could be considered a radical (though inconvenient) form of communication, several Western authors recognized the social value of silence. Among them, Soren Kierkegaard thought that silence would function as 'a precursor for clearer and substantively deeper understanding', while in the Jewish tradition, Sages thought of silence as 'a safety fence for wisdom'. In yoga, *mauna* is maintained with the aim of achieving uninterrupted concentration - *ekāgratā*. Outgoing emotions of the mind - such as anger, excessive argumentativeness, etc. - would also get constrained, as a side effect of this practice. In *Ashtānga* Yoga, *mauna* would be part of a larger body of practices called *tapas*. Overall, *mauna*, as the practice of *tapas*, would not be viewed as penance, but rather 'as a mental training to develop willpower', as Bābā Hari Dāss himself put it.

No doubt, in the beginning of his practice, Hari Dāss encountered obstacles. "*For twelve years, I faced much difficulty...for two or three years, you have to fight with anger.*" Yogic silence does not merely mean 'not speaking'; it means 'keeping a quiet

mind'. Hence, he said, "*The mind can't be stopped merely by keeping your mouth shut.*"



Bābā Hari Dāss - silent yogi, writing on a chalkboard, c. 1976, California.

An architect of temples

Bābā Hari Dāss was very much influenced by the teachings of Bhagavad Geetā, which considers *karma yoga* to be selfless service, and the most straightforward pathway to progress in spiritual life. He first learned temple masonry from a local mason and then used those skills in building temples, ashrams, statues of deities, and rock walls. The Hanumangarh temple and the Kainchi Ashram in Nainital are well-known among the structures he built. When he went to the United States and Canada, he continued using his designing, planning and construction skills. In February 1982, after a fire burnt a recently constructed building at the Mount Madonna Center, he used the occurrence as an opportunity to build a larger structure with more capacity. His

example inspired many volunteers to help with those *karma yoga* efforts. He was not content to just supervise. A newspaper wrote about him: "Bābā Hari Dāss swings his hammer, alongside everyone else". The same publication described how Bābā Hari Dāss donated proceeds from his books to the Shri Ram Foundation, set up to help destitute children in India. From those funds and other donations, Shri Ram Ashram was created near Haridwar in India.

Teaching Ram Dāss

In 1967, an ex-Harvard professor, Richard Alpert (famous as Ram Dāss) travelled to India to Kainchi, Nainital. At that time, Bābā Hari Dāss was already an accomplished yoga teacher and had a large following. On the recommendation of his guru, Neem Karoli Bābā, Richard Alpert received teachings of *Ashtānga* Yoga: "Bābā Hari Dāss was my teacher. I was taught by this man with a chalkboard, in the most terse way possible". The remarkable feature is that Bābā Hari Dāss trained Richard, alias Ram Dāss, in *rājayoga* and focussed meditation, even while he, Bābā Hari Dāss, maintained *mauna*. Hari Dāss Bābā had been Richard Alpert's *sāadhanā* tutor, when the latter lived in Kainchi; that training of several months continued in a series of letters between Bābā Hari Dāss and Ram Dāss in the period 1967–1969. Some benefits of those learning experiences in India were long-lasting. Ram Dāss said, "The aphasia has introduced silence into my conversation...I had training for this kind of thing when I was with Bābā Hari Dāss

in India. I was *mauna*.” and “Silence brought me great energy of clarity”. As Hari Dāss wrote, “**Nothing is better than something.**”

Moving to the West

It was in 1970 that several Westerners, who were already familiar with the teaching style of Bābā Hari Dāss, travelled to Haridwar and convinced him to move to the US to continue his way of silent teaching. His stay would be sponsored by Ruth Horsting, later known as Mā Renu. Bābā Hari Dāss was ready to move to the US. The 52-year-old Ruth felt, “there was no time to lose. I had already given my permission to sponsor his stay in America.” Many years later, Mā Renu said, “What had been intended as a short stay, turned into a 29-year *darshana* and blessing.” This association became, over the years, a fulfilment of selfless service ideals, when several organizational projects and service missions were formed in the US, Canada and India. In 1976, Bābā Hari Dāss directed her in forming the Shri Ram Foundation, to support destitute children located in Shyampur, in Uttarakhand, near Haridwar.

Codifying Prenatal Yoga

While in the United States, Bābā Hari Dāss agreed to mentor a pregnant student, Jeannine Parvati, through a course of prenatal Yoga. During that time, she continued practising *āsanas* and authored a book, titled *Prenatal Yoga & Natural Childbirth*, published in 1974. As the daughter of a First Nation father (Ute tribe) and as a longtime student of Bābā Hari Dāss, Jeannine

Parvati Baker's midwifery philosophy was one of earth-based values and non-harming principles. After ‘Prenatal Yoga’ gained in popularity, Bābā Hari Dāss expounded supporting practices of yoga, to include prenatal *āsana*, *prānāyāma*, meditation, Ayurveda, and mindfulness techniques for child-birth labour, that formed the basis of Prenatal Yoga Teacher Training. Emphasis was given on the anatomy and physiology of pregnancy, common discomforts during pregnancy, and how to support mothers through every stage of pregnancy and postpartum.



Mount Madonna Center

In 1978, Bābāji inspired the founding of Mount Madonna Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences, which has become a widely known and highly respected spiritual retreat and seminar facility in the Santa Cruz Mountains. Mount Madonna Center is home to a residential community dedicated to support the Center’s activities, which include diverse programs in yoga and personal growth, the Sankat Mochan Hanumān Temple and the Mount Madonna Institute. Bābāji also inspired the Mount Madonna School (PreK-12th grade), which is hosted by the Center, and is known for excellence

in children's education. Other centres dedicated to Bābāji's teachings include the Pacific Cultural Center in Santa Cruz, Salt Spring Yoga Center and School on Salt Spring Island near Vancouver, B.C., Canada and spiritual communities in Toronto and Los Angeles.

For ten months each year, Bābāji taught, encouraged, worked and played alongside the Mount Madonna community that he continued to inspire. For two months of the year, he would return to India to give guidance and energy towards caring for the children of Shri Ram Ashram, where Hari Dāss Bābā has inspired generations of students. When once asked what his intentions were, he stated simply, "To make a few good people". He also would say that the teacher could only point the way, or more tersely put, "I can cook for you, I can't eat for you." To this, he added: "The world is not a burden; we make it a burden with our desires. When desires are removed, the world is as light as a feather on an elephant's back." "Life is not a burden; we make it one, when we refuse to accept things as they are."

Over and above his achievements in the field of *Hatha* yoga, he also wrote extensively. His literary works consist of scriptural commentaries on Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, Srimad Bhagavad Geetā, Sāṅkhya Kārikā and Vedānta; his collections also include wisdom-packed aphorisms about the meaning and purpose of life, essays, plays, short stories, children's stories, *kirtan*,

mantras, etc. His in-depth instructional yoga material forms the basis of a yoga certification-training programme.

Leaving the mortal coil

In 2013, after a detailed physical examination, it was announced by his medical team, that Bābā Hari Dāss 'had a dramatic neurological change that has affected his mobility, stamina, and expression'. His physicians conducted all appropriate tests but could not find any treatable cause. At that time, he discontinued his regular activities of teaching classes on Vedānta, Yoga Sutras and Bhagavad Geetā; he also stopped attending ceremonial events. He died in peace in hospice care on 25 September 2018, in Bonny Doon, near Santa Cruz, California. Known and admired by the local community, it didn't take long, before hundreds of people began lining up to pay their respects, reported the local paper. His physical presence is deeply missed even today by the children of Shri Ram Ashram and by all those who knew and loved him. Throughout his life and even now, Bābāji exemplifies the profound teaching:

**I am not the body; I am not the mind;
I am the Self.**

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- Swāmi Chidānanda

Transformation is a profound and lasting change in our consciousness. Deep-rooted factors of psychology, such as fear and attachment, prevent any true change in us, even when we stay with various spiritual practices for decades on end. Most of the time, we are not aware of what those factors are, which have been keeping us pinned down to a lower state of consciousness. *Bhakti* can indeed pluck away such issues, which the Upanishads call¹ the 'knots of the heart'.

What is *bhakti*?

All spiritual practices have an external form and an internal essence. No wonder, 99% of the so-called spiritual aspirants do not reach anywhere in their lifetime, because they cling to the external form and pay lip service to the essential dimension. When we are really into *bhakti*, we experience an intense bond with God and experience His closeness to us all the time. We also have no doubt in our bosom that He is watching over us and He will never let us down.

All the secrets are hidden in the power of this bond, in the closeness and in the awareness of God being near us. When the devotee arrives at this state of mind, a large number of negativities in his bosom are bound to get drastically reduced, paving the way to happiness and assuredness. Love of God then

becomes a reward in itself as, with the reduction of negative tendencies, we are filled with cheerfulness and self-confidence in anything that we are doing.



When it hits us

The examples of Saint Tulasidās in the North and Saint Purandaradāsa in the South throw precious light on this transformative phenomenon. The former was very attached to his wife and the latter, to his wealth. Tulasi's wife rebuked him and said, "If you had such devotion to Lord Rāma, you would have got liberated by now." That came as a bolt from the blue, and the scholar-poet got transformed into an inspired writer with

noble thoughts, a lot of creativity and rich devotional sentiments. His work, Sri Rām Charit Mānas, has made millions move towards *Rāma-bhakti*. Purandara, who was an extremely wealthy businessman, recognized that God's powers were far beyond human comprehension, and that powerful recognition made him walk away from all his wealth. The countless devotional compositions by this saint are, even today, a driving force in the *bhakti* movement of the world.

Whether one walks away from one's family or not, is not an issue here. There are many, who have gone away to the Himālayas and joined some āshram, but that does not mean that their life got transformed. External changes do not necessarily bring about inner transformation. Reflecting on the irrelevance of the place where we live, Rājā Kulasekhara Ālwār writes in his immortal Mukunda-Mālā:

Let my residence be in the heaven², on the earth or in the netherworlds. What I desire the most is the constant, sweet remembrance of your lotus feet, O Lord Mukunda!

The medicine that cures

Disease, old age and numerous afflictions mark this human life of ours, between birth and death; these are also indirect and direct causes of suffering. Wise people have called life, in a figurative manner, nothing short of an ailment. The medication for this ailment, however, is devotion to God. Whether the outer symptoms go away or not, our

inner strength grows by leaps and bounds when we anchor ourselves in *bhakti*. Love of God also blesses us with very broadminded outlooks, which alleviate our worldly suffering.

The king-poet Kulasekhara declares³, *The remedy called Krishna, upon being taken in, cures us of all ailments, and blesses us with the blissful state called moksha.*



All this is not exaggeration. Though 999 out of 1000 persons may not experience freedom from the shackles of worldly life, the one who goes for devotion - with emotional intensity and intellectual clarity - succeeds in verifying these age-old truths.

The saint Aruna Giri Nāthar, in Tamil Nadu, was in a terrible state of affairs,

having been enslaved by very many addictions. He was unable to change himself, and that frustrated him so much, that he thought of committing suicide. His remorse made God take pity on him and, in the nick of time, God saved him from jumping off a cliff to his death. The man, who had gone to the worst levels of degradation, was raised to higher states of consciousness by divine grace. Unthinkable are the miracles that can take place when human consciousness is stirred at a deep level. The 15th century poet-saint lived the rest of his life as an inspired devotee of Lord Muruga. His immortal work 'Tiruppugazh' continues to guide spiritually inclined people on their path of *sāadhanā*.

Shri Krishna declares thus in the Geetā

The transformation from being 'an extremely wayward person (*su-durāchāra*)' to 'someone of highly righteous behaviour (*dharmātmā*)' is the topic of two verses⁴ in the ninth chapter of the Geetā. Lord Shri Krishna points out that the key to such unbelievable change is 'single-pointed devotion' to God. What magic this *bhakti* does, is beyond our comprehension and is, therefore, an issue of faith. In other words, it defies reason.

Lives have been saved, from time immemorial, with the elixir of *bhakti*. People, who were on the verge of ending their own lives, have found a saint coming their way, who then brings new hope to them. When they are truly prepared, this new development can make a huge difference. Stories of

Vālmiki and Angulimāla are illustrations in the context. While Vālmiki explicitly became a devotee of Lord Rāma, Angulimāla surrendered to the Buddha. Their criminal lives were brought to a close, and the saints, who appeared on the stage of their lives, ushered in a phase of divine life for them.

Examples apart, the sheer logic of the prospect of transformation should appeal to us, if we seriously think about it. Deep inside everyone of us, there is an indomitable urge to be a good person (*dharmātmā*). Ordinarily, life's circumstances make it extremely difficult for us to change our habits. We are caught in a vicious circle: old tendencies (*vāsanās*) make us do wrong things; then the wrong actions strengthen the old tendencies. Intense *bhakti*, however, provides us with the extra fuel to burn away our *vāsanās*. Thus, *bhakti* can be compared with rocket fuel, which can help a space vehicle escape the gravitational pull of the earth and sail forth into the vast space.

How to develop bhakti

Whenever we praise the power of devotion during *satsangas*, someone or the other asks the question, "How do we acquire devotion to God?" Though the answer is not easy, it is not an impossible question either. Association with people, whose heart is filled with devotion, is highly likely to kindle devotion in us too. We human beings, however smart we may be, tend to pick up vibrations from others, in whose company we spend time. If we have around us, and in close proximity to ourselves, people with

intense *bhakti*, that is great, good fortune. Otherwise, we need to be in touch with the literature of great devotees like Sri Rāmakrishna, MirāBāi, Surdās, etc.

In summary, the writer has no doubt that *bhakti* can transform our personality from being worldly to being spiritually awakened. All that we need to do, is to take the plunge. We must put aside our laziness, hesitation, dilly-dallying, etc., and nurture true love for God. The rest

will happen. When we put one step towards Him, He will put ten towards us.

Notes:

- 1 *hridaya-granthis* – see Mundaka Upanishad, 2.2.8
- 2 *divi vā bhuvi vā mamāstu vāsah*– Mukunda Mālā, verse 8
- 3 *he lokāh shrinuta...paramaushadham..* – Mukunda Mālā, verse 20
- 4 *api chet-sudurāchārah..* – verses 30, 31 of Geetā, chapter 9.



The next step.....

There's an old riddle that says-five frogs are sitting on a lily pad. One decides to jump off. How many are left? If your answer is 'four', thank your maths teacher for your excellent maths skills. Unfortunately, this is not a test of your maths abilities.

It's a life problem.

The correct answer is 'five'. Yes, all five are still sitting there on the lily pad.

The one frog has only decided to jump, but hasn't.

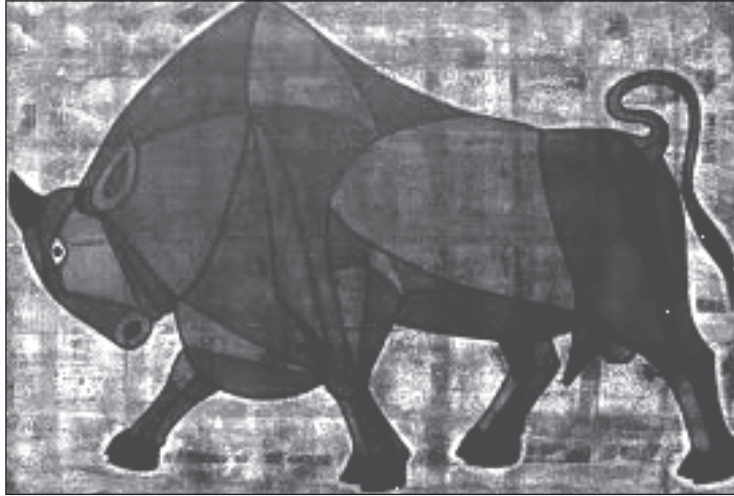
Life is not a spectator sport. It is indeed a contact sport. And there are no practice sessions, and you've been in the game from day one.

As clichéd as it seems, 'The journey starts with a single step.' - not by thinking about taking that step.

Author Unknown



- as told by Ramana Maharshi



A Brahmin had a wife and several children. He also owned a water buffalo. He would milk the buffalo, and feed his family from the money obtained from the sale of the milk, curd and other products. The animal, sumptuously fed by him, yielded plenty of milk. The Brahmin was comfortably well off and contented.

In the course of time, however, due to illness, he lost his wife and children, one by one, and was left all alone. With no remaining family, he showered all his affection on the buffalo, and it became the centre of his life. Eventually, the buffalo died too. By then, he had had enough of worldly life, and thus became a sanyasi. He joined the hermitage of a Guru, to immerse himself in meditation and other spiritual pursuits.

The Guru called him after a while, and made enquiries about his progress. The

Brahmin shared his background and confessed that the buffalo, which had been the centre of his affections earlier, had now become the centre of his meditation. Being a practical person, the master concluded that the Brahmin was suffering from an obstacle of the past.

He told the disciple in a phlegmatic tone, "Dear! The eternal Brahman is called *asti-bhāti-priyam*. *asti* is what is. *bhāti* is that which appears and shines. *priyam* is what is dear to us. Since the buffalo is dear to you, it too is *priyam* and nothing but Brahman. The buffalo also has a form and name. All that you need to do now, is to do away with all forms and names. What remains then, is Brahman. Meditate accordingly."

The disciple followed the instruction and attained Self-realization.

- Compiled by Ratna Viswanath

Māsāni Amman temple is a very unique *Devi* temple in South India. It is located in Ānaimalai, near Pollachi in Coimbatore district, Tamil Nadu. This temple is built on a cremation ground; the sanctum of *Devi* is also built in the cremation area. The deity is *Mayāna Shayani* (In Tamil, *mayānam* – crematorium, *shayani* – she, who is reclining or lying down). With usage, *Mayāna Shayani* got shortened to *MāshāNi* or *MāsāNi*. *Amman* is the Tamil word for ‘Mother Goddess’.

Shri Māsāni Amman is in a reclining posture and is 17-feet long, with Her head to the East. She holds a skull, a serpent, a trident and an *udukkai* (a South Indian instrument similar to, but slightly larger than, the *damaru*) in her four arms. Two of Her arms are pointed skyward. At the deity’s feet, there is a statue of an *asura*.

The temple draws devotees in large numbers. Many devotees come to seek



Māsāni Amman’s grace for good health and a happy family life.

With its three imposing *gopurams*, the temple is a structure of architectural grandeur.

The Legends associated with the Temple

The temple is considered to have come up 10-20 centuries ago. There are many legends related to Māsāni Amman.

There was a demon named Makutāsuran in Ānaimalai. Makutāsuran tortured the villagers. He kept them as his slaves. His atrocities became unbearable. Seeking divine grace and intervention, a pious priest in Ānaimalai created a *yāga*. He lit a lamp, using the



kerosene from the cremation ground. From this lamp, Māsāni Amman appeared in the form of Light, and annihilated the *asura*. Thenceforth, She was hailed as the Goddess of Justice.

Another legend is that *parāshakti* manifested Herself in this cremation ground and blessed Lord Rāma. When Lord Rāma was on his way to rescue Sita Devi, He learned about Māsāni Amman and He realised that She represents *parāshakti*. With the sand available in the crematorium, He made an idol of the Goddess. The idol was in a reclining posture. He offered his prayers to Her, before proceeding on His mission.

The third reference to the origin of Māsāni Amman relates to the Sangam Era. Ānaimalai was known as Nannanur and Kongunādu. In Sangam Literature, Ānaimalai is mentioned as Umbarkādu. The region was ruled by a chieftain named Kootru Nannan. Nannan had a mango tree; the tree grew on the banks of the Āzhiyāru river. He proclaimed that the fruits of the tree were meant for his own use, and that nobody should take or eat them. A young girl (*kanyā*), while bathing in the river, saw a mango floating in the water. It came floating towards her and she ate it, not knowing the orders of the ruler. The angry and cruel cheftain ordered her execution. She pleaded 'not guilty', and prayed to be set free. She explained that she had not committed any offence; if at all it was considered an act of theft, it was more by chance, than by design. Her father also made an offer to the chieftain. He offered gold, equal to her weight. In addition, he offered him 81

elephants. The ruler did not relent. The *kanyā* was executed, despite opposition from the public.

The body of the *kanyā* was buried. The aggrieved public built a *samādhi* for her and prayed for her salvation. They also made an idol of her in a reclining form and began worshipping it. Soon, a temple was built for her.

In order to gain justice from the heartless chieftain, the *kanyā* became a goddess. She became the guardian deity of the area. To this day, she continues to fight against injustice.

Later, the villagers fought against Nannan and killed him in a battle.

The Stone of Justice

This temple is a court for all seekers of justice. People whose belongings have been stolen, or who have been cheated out of their property, or have been cheated by their partners, friends or others, visit this temple to seek justice. In the Western side of the temple, there is a stone. It resembles a *lingam*. This Stone of Justice (*Neeti-kal* in Tamil; *neeti* – ethics, right conduct, *kal(kallu)* – stone) symbolises the Goddess of Justice. The devotees grind red chillies, using a mortar/ grinding stone installed in the temple premises. They apply the ground chilli-paste on the *Neeti-kal*, praying that all their problems be solved, and that the wrongdoers get the punishment they deserve. The *Neeti-kal* responds to the pleading of the aggrieved devotees. It is believed that the devotees get their issues sorted out within 90 days. They visit the temple again and express their

gratitude by offering sesame seeds & oil.

Festivals and celebrations

The famous Kundam festival is held annually. This festival starts with the hoisting of the *dhwaja* (flag) on an auspicious day in the month of *Thai* (mid-January to mid-February). The most important event during this festival is the Mayāna Puja, which is celebrated on the night of *Mahāshivarātri*. It is held at midnight, and is followed by special pujas for Māsāni Amman. Thereafter, the priests, soothsayers and others proceed to the crematorium on the banks of Āzhiyāru river. An eight-foot-long idol of the goddess, fashioned out of the mud in the crematorium, is kept ready and adorned for further rituals. A mound of mud, taken from the neck of the idol, towards the conclusion of the festivities, is placed in the main temple, after consecrating it the next morning in the Āzhiyāru river.

A highlight of the Kundam festival is *Elumbukkadi*, a function that is celebrated on the banks of River Noyyal, for Goddess Angālamman. Thereafter, Angālamman is taken back to the main sanctum and worshipped there. She is regarded as the guardian deity of the village.

Important Tamil festivals are also celebrated in a grand manner. *Amāvāsya*, Tuesdays and Fridays are observed with devotional fervour.

Other shrines in the Temple-complex

Other than Māsāni Amman, the two main shrines are of *Neeti-Kal* and Mahāmuniappan. These deities are

worshipped with great devotion. They are also believed to possess the power to cure illness, and resolve issues that the devotees face in their lives.

The sanctum of Mahāmuniappan faces the main sanctum of Māsāni Amman.

There are shrines for Pechi, Durgā, Mahishāsoramardhini, Sapta-Mātās, Vināyaka, Karupparāyar, Bhuvaneshwari and Bhairavar in the corridor-*prākāra* of the temple.

Prayers and Offerings

Devotees come here to pray for solutions to various issues that they face in their lives. These include family problems, losses due to breach of trust, losses due to theft, mental worries, safety of children and the effects of spells and witchcraft.

Once their prayers are answered, they offer *abhisheka* (anointing the deity). The oil used for Māsāni Amman *abhisheka* is believed to have medicinal value. People apply it on their body to get relief from pain and afflictions.

Those who wish to get married soon, make an offering of mud-statues of Māsāni Amman.

Māsāni Amman is said to be the source of infinite energy. She is believed to bless women, who are trying to bear a child. The *prasād* distributed at the temple is called *pacchilam marundu*. It is considered to be highly beneficial for women, who wish to bear a child, to consume this *prasād*, and tie a black thread around their wrist. Māsāni Amman is also believed to relieve the pain and other health issues that girls undergo, when they attain puberty.

Many devotees get a black or red thread tied around their wrist, to nullify the effects of witchcraft and black magic. Some even write their worries and issues on a piece of paper, and have it tied around the hands of the deity. It is believed that, within 90 days, they get the solution to their problems.

People offer *vastras* (sārees) to Amman. They offer oil for *abhisheka*. This is called *taila-kāppu*. Devotees also make offerings of *mangalasutras*, cradles, sheep, cocks and cattle. Physically rolling around the temple/ shrine (*angapradakshinam/shayanapradakshinam*), tonsuring, walking on the firepit, are other devout practices.

Reaching there

The temple is about one-and-half hours by road, from Coimbatore. There are lots of buses from Coimbatore main bus stand to Māsāni Amman temple. One can also take buses from Pollachi.

Notes

1. *arulmigu* – In Tamil, *arul* has two meanings –
(a) grace, mercy, benevolence, compassion, blessings.

(b) brightness of appearance, heavenly/ spiritual glow, much like the Sanskrit word *tejas*.

migu – abundant, infinite.

In the context of a deity, *arulmigu* describes an entity with heavenly glow and brightness of appearance or 'the spiritually glowing deity', so to say. Also, the deity showers His/ Her overflowing grace abundantly on the devotees. Hence, the temples in Tamil Nadu prefix the honorific title *arulmigu* to the deity's name. This can be compared with the honorific title *Shri*, that is prefixed to the deity's name in other temples.

2. Angālamman – a Goddess, who is propitiated as the guardian deity in villages and other places in the southern States of India, especially in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Sources

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The scarcest resource in life is not time, energy, or love. It's attention. 'Succumbing to distractions' is a decision to lower your cognitive, emotional, and social intelligence. Concentration is a precious commodity. Your most important priorities deserve your undivided focus.

Adam Grant

- Aspi Shroff

In the midst of the external world of actions - living, interacting, thinking, feeling, etc., there are challenges. These challenges are in the forms of fears, questions, doubts, problems, mistakes, mess, etc. Because of these, we often forget our blessings. Our inner peace, meaning of life and faith in self remain in the background as a vague feeling, and we turn to outward 'substitute searches' for happiness.

FEAR GAMES

Fears appear as the biggest monsters of life. Fears make our minds and hearts 'shut up', bringing ignorance, misery, hatred and more fear. Apart from fears that relate to basic survival instinct, all other fears are imaginary. We are commonly conditioned to try and remove what we fear. At times, it may work. But then, new fears come in. The challenge is to accept our fears and move on with faith, with our own inner courage and strength. Thereby, we can become fearless by knowing our Oneness of being. We can then look upon all fears as 'a mere forgetting of our Infinite Oneness'. We may even be able to treat fears as life-games.

CONDITIONING GAMES

In growing up, the outside world teaches us that we are limited and separate. We are taught to respond in very limited ways. We are also taught to face societal

and self-created pressures, inducements, expectations and life itself, as very serious matters. Our original 'child-self' - our unconditional innocence, openness, joy, celebration of life – tends to get forgotten. Yet, we can get back to celebrating our original state of being, and even 'play' seriousness-games.

GAMES OF NEGATIVITY

Forgetting our real universal consciousness, we experience negativity, fear, weakness, confusion and unhappiness. We then cry for positive strokes from the external world. Negativity is a game of 'covering our eyes with our own hands, and crying that there is so much darkness'. As we see the light of our real self - our 'soul-power', we can laugh at our self-made darkness-games.

PEOPLE GAMES

We are all patterns arising out of the Oneness of all existence. We see the 'variety' of mind-heart patterns, as 'different'. With our self-limiting minds and hearts, these 'different' patterns become 'differences', and lead to difficult human relationships. Because of this, we try to please (win over) others, or push (pressurise) others. Else, we try to find substitutes in relationships. Even while being caring, we blame and remind people of their mistakes, instead of making them feel that mistakes are only a 'forgetting of the real self'.

OPPOSITES

We can thank both the opposites - loss/gain, pain/pleasure, friend/enemy and so on, as challenges that evoke our inner power and wisdom. Thus, we can go beyond opposites and enjoy these opposites as life-games.

LIFE AND DEATH

Often, this is a very difficult challenge; yet, it is a challenge where we are without a choice. As a simple analogy, Oneness shows us that life is like the ocean 'taking the form of waves' and that death is 'the waves blending back into the ocean'. Death, in this light, is the ending of what appears to be separate Being, separate Consciousness, minds and feelings and life. It is the 'separated-ness' coming back into the 'Oneness, that ever IS'.

THE GAME OF CHANGE

A common game we play is 'to not want and not accept change'. At other times, we want only the 'change that we want'. This is a game of mistaking the 'transient finite' for the 'unchanging infinite'.

EGO - THE BIGGEST, YET INVISIBLE GAME !!

Me! My! Only !! This is the importance and weightage given to the ego. I must! You must/must not! I must not be hurt or made to feel small - emotionally, mentally or physically. I must have lots. I must be loved, liked, have lots of friends, and must not be lonely. I must be valued. I must not be called 'nobody' and 'useless'. I must not be called 'wrong'. I must have ego, to show everyone that I am great; I must not have ego, and must

act as a humble nobody. Even thoughts such as "I must meditate, pray, be silent, etc.", are examples of the ego at play, when done for show, or as a compulsion. It spoils the naturalness and genuineness, and is not a 'natural flowering from within', which it should really have been.

INNER FEELINGS

Feeling lonely, uncared for and unloved, feeling hurt by the actions of others, feeling that one is useless, or that life is meaningless, feeling depressed about the past or the future, and in the 'now'.... yes, these are difficult challenges. Yet, the greater the challenge, the better we can develop our inner strength, understanding and peace. Eventually, we can reach a stage where we can smile at even these difficult feelings and say 'thank you' to ourselves, for reminding our own self to awaken the power, the magic, the EVER present possibilities. We can begin to feel Oneness-Love-ness, peace and contentment, which is love for our real Self and for the real Self in each being and all beings. Even when these seem to be invisible, and cannot be easily felt at the start, yet these feelings are ever present.

HEALTH

Physical, emotional and mental well-being is natural. These, if forgotten, lead to ill-health.

FAILURE GAMES

These are of three types –

(1) Failure due to lack of effort, or due to 'giving up'. This is the challenge that can

be met with inner strength.

(2) Failure because of anxiety about results and due to the fear of failure. This, too, can be met with inner strength.

(3) Fear of failure, because of comparison with others. This can lead to

a lot of stress and distress. Yet, this is a game that can open up a higher life-purpose and larger possibilities!

All these CHALLENGES are GAMES that can lead us back into remembering, re-joining and being our original Self.



What is this mind?

Who is hearing these sounds?

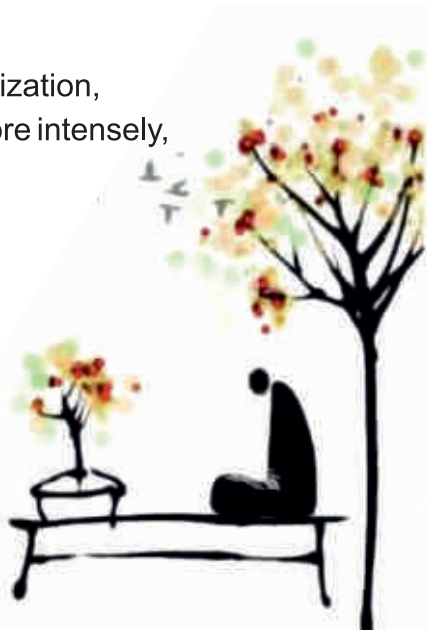
Do not mistake any state for self-realization,
But continue to ask yourself even more intensely,
What is it that hears?

Who is hearing?

Your physical being doesn't hear,
Nor does the void,
Then what does?

Strive to find out.

Put aside your rational intellect,
Give up all techniques,
Just get rid of the
notion of self.



Bassui Tokusho (1327-1387)

Rinzai Zen Master



What do we learn from the Upanishads?

Knowledgeable, Yet Humble Qualities that Teachers should Possess

- Swāmi Chidānanda

Some of us are teachers by profession or by the choice of our way of living. All of us are teachers informally, for there are always some, maybe a small number, at home or outside, who wish to learn something from us.

Rishi Pippalāda in the Prashnopanishad was highly knowledgeable, and was regarded during his time, as all-knowing. He was, however extremely humble when he said to the six scholarly students who approached him:

*yathā kāmam prashnān pricchata
yadi vijnāsyāmah, sarvam ha vovakshyāmah*

Please ask questions as you desire.

If we know (the answers), we shall tell you everything.

(Prashna Upanishad 1.2)

A fully filled pot makes no sound; a half-filled pot gives out a lot of noise. The mark of vast knowledge and great wisdom is such humility, as demonstrated by Sage Pippalāda. We must stand guard against all forms of self-importance, arrogance and one-upmanship. Illumination, with profound and lasting peace, can then come to us.

The above mantra also shows how the ancient teachers encouraged questions and promoted an atmosphere of dialogue and debate.



God is always joking. Look at your own life – it is a joke!
Look at other people's lives, and you will find jokes and jokes and jokes.
Seriousness is illness; seriousness has nothing spiritual about it.
Spirituality is laughter, spirituality is joy, spirituality is fun.

Osho



- Swāmi Akhandānanda Saraswati Mahārāj

Actions take place. What are the constituents of these actions? Are they constituted only of Primordial nature, the three modes (*sattva, raja, tamas*) and a mixture of many things, or is there anything else? On this issue, there are many different opinions. In respect of the material cause and efficient cause of actions, there are many concepts --
- Time, effect of past actions, nature, chance, etc.

The main point is neither about actions taking place or not, nor is it about whether the actions are desire-oriented or selfless. It is about whether you consider yourself as the doer of these actions or not. To consider oneself as the doer of an action emanating from an indeterminable cause, is just like considering oneself as an architect of the shining stars in the sky.

You may be egoistic, you can blame the effect of actions on past births, you can dance to the tune of your latent past tendencies (*vāsanās*) and/or you may float in the waves of the society – rising, flowing, changing, bubbling, prancing alternatively. It is alright, but do you recognize the Reality behind it? It is sheer ignorance to consider oneself as the doer of actions or enjoyer of the fruit of actions.

Whether one considers himself as the enjoyer in this world or in another world, the doership and enjoyership are illusions. One goes to heaven or hell, according to one's own imagination.

The limited identity of *ātman* cannot be considered as being the real *ātman*. That which is seen is obviously distinct, different and alien from the one who sees it. As soon as we realize that our real Self is one, indivisible and total, the illusion of being limited is dispelled. Hence strive to know your real Self.

Renounce the ideas of the illusory doership, enjoyership, being subject to birth and death, and being limited by time, space and objects. If actions take place, fine! If actions do not take place, never mind! You may live in any manner, but your nature is the supreme bliss. You are absolutely free, and you stand liberated here and now, while alive.





उत्थातव्यं जागृतव्यं योक्तव्यं भूरिकर्मसु ।
भविष्यतीत्येव मनः कृत्वा सततमव्यथैः ॥

Arise, awake, get involved in great works!
Make up your mind, saying, "It will be done!"
and keep away all agitation.

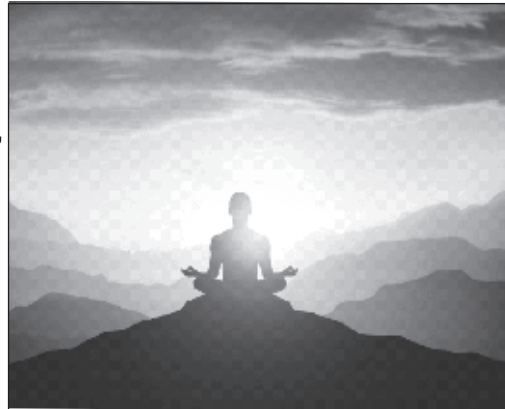


- Kabir

As oil is in the oil seed,
And fire is in the flint,
So is the Lord within thee, unrevealed.
Follow thy Master's simple and true instructions,
Keep vigil strict at midnight and so find Him.

As fragrance is within the flower's blossom,
So is the Lord within thee, unrevealed.
But as the musk-deer searches for
musk in forest grass,
So does man search for Him outside
And finds Him not.

As the pupil is within the eye itself,
So is the Lord within thy body;
But fools know not this simple fact,
And search for Him elsewhere.



As air pervades all space,
But none can see it,
So does the Lord pervade the body;
But He remains to each one unrevealed,
Since the lodestone of the heart is not attached to Him.



O man, the object of supreme value,
For which you search throughout the world,
Is here within you,
But the veil of Illusion ever separates you from Him.
Tear the veil boldly asunder and you will find Him.

My Lord is living in each human being;
There is no bridal bed without the Bridegroom.
But blessed is the body
In which He reveals Himself.

As fragrance is in the flower,
So is the Lord within thee.
But He reveals Himself in His beloved Saints;
That is all you need to know. Go forth and meet them.

ETERNAL VIBRATIONS

Contribute To Noble Causes



सहस्रगुणमाप्नोति
दाता नास्त्यत्र संशयः ।
बीजवप्ता तु कृषकः
यथाप्नोति भृशं फलम् ॥

*sahasra-gunam-āpnoti
dātā nāstyatra samshayah
beeja-vaptā tu krishakah
yathāpnoti bhrisham phalam*

***Those who (generously) give will surely get (their rewards) a thousand times! There is no doubt about this. It is just as a farmer gets plenty of crops when he sows (just a few) seeds.
(From Subhāshita-Ratna-Bhandāra)***

This old saying is in praise of charity and generosity. “Charity brings prosperity”, they say. The verse supplies a very simple analogy. The seeds that we sow are tiny but the crops that we reap are substantial, in successful agriculture. The Law of Karma similarly assures us that our acts of sharing our wealth with the society will never go to waste.





FOWAI FORUM

Wisdom for Right Action

Dissemination of spiritual and secular wisdom is the main objective of the Fowai Forum. Educational activities, human welfare and services to all life are its concerns. Insights and observations especially based on Indian culture and heritage will find expression in its activities.

This public trust came into being in the year 2006. Registered as per the Mumbai Public Trust Act of 1950, the Forum engages in organizing talks and workshops as well as in publication of books and audio-visual media.

F.O.W.A.I. = Flame Of Who Am I?

“Who am I?” is the most basic question of life. The understanding of the self, the ‘me’, can cause radical change in the quality of life. This requires turning (the flame of) attention towards thoughts and emotions. When likes and dislikes fall away, pure perception takes place. That heralds freedom.

Dates of publication : 15th of October, December, February, April, June & August

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