
wisdom *of the* sadhu

TEACHINGS OF SUNDAR SINGH

compiled and edited by kim comer

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Seek not to understand so that thou
mayest believe, but believe so that
thou mayest understand.

Augustine of Hippo



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to the reader

As a large, red sun rises from the Punjabi plains, the solitary figure of a sadhu—an Indian holy man—comes into view, trudging along a dusty road. In another frame the figure appears again, this time toiling to reach a remote Tibetan village along a narrow, icy track better suited for goats than for humans. In yet another, the man appears at the edge of an ancient marketplace at dusk, mingling with the crowd as he seeks a place to sit and rest. Wherever this sadhu appears, those who look into his eyes immediately sense his extraordinary humility and peace. They discover a mystic...

Just as Sundar Singh appeared in such scenes again and again—without prior announcement, without introduction, without credentials—so he appears in this book. “Scenes,” the first section, contains impressions from key events in his life. It is based both on accounts by Sundar Singh himself, and by writers who knew him. “Conversations,” the second, contains dialogues that draw freely on material from all six of

Sundar Singh's books, as well as interviews and articles. Both sections are interspersed with parables that punctuate the themes. Though structurally unusual, the resulting collage allows us to encounter the sadhu in the way his contemporaries did: not as a systematic thinker, but as a personal teacher.

In his teachings as in his life, Sundar Singh offers little by way of rational orientation. He defies categorization and critical analysis. The impact of his message, however, is always direct and immediate. His voice rings with a clarity that rises from the deepest, clearest sources of life itself.

K. C.

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wisdom of the sadhu



I. scenes



PARABLE

the hungry birds

Once as I wandered in the mountains, I came upon an outcropping of rocks, and as I sat on the highest rock to rest and look out over the valley, I saw a nest in the branches of a tree. The young birds in the nest were crying noisily. Then I saw how the mother bird returned with food for her young ones. When they heard the sound of her wings and felt her presence nearby, they cried all the more loudly and opened their beaks wide. But after the mother bird fed them and flew away again, they were quiet. Climbing down to look more closely, I saw that the newly hatched birds had not yet opened their eyes. Without even being able to see their mother, they opened their beaks and begged for nourishment whenever she approached.

These tiny birds did not say: “We will not open our beaks until we can see our mother clearly and also see what kind of food she offers. Perhaps it is not our mother at all but instead some dangerous enemy. And who knows if it is proper nourishment or some kind of poison that is being fed to us?” If they had reasoned thus, they would never have discovered the truth. Before they were even strong enough to open their eyes, they would have starved to death. But they held no such doubts about the presence and love of their mother, and so after a few days, they opened their eyes and rejoiced to see her with them. Day by day they grew stronger and developed into the form and likeness of the mother, and soon they were able to soar up into the freedom of the skies.

We humans often think of ourselves as the greatest living beings, but do we not have something to learn from these common birds? We often question the reality and the loving nature of God. But the Master has said: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.” Whenever we open our hearts to God, we receive spiritual nourishment and grow more and more into the likeness of God until we reach spiritual maturity. And once we open our spiritual eyes and see God’s presence, we find indescribable and unending bliss.



dharmā • devotion

Candlelight flickers across the worn pages, and the Sanskrit characters dance rhythmically, like graceful maidens chanting ancient hymns. Transfixed, the young boy follows their motion, and his soul sings in unison with them:

A mass of radiance, glowing all around,
I see thee, hard to look at, on every side;
Glory of flaming fire and sun, immeasurable,
without beginning, middle, or end of power.
Infinite arms, whose eyes are the moon and sun,
I see thee, whose face is flaming fire,
burning the whole universe with thy radiance.

Quietly another voice enters the song. It is a gentle, beloved voice, calling him, calling “Sundar,” drawing him out of the chant, away from the dance. Slowly closing his inner eyes, he looks up into the candlelit face of his mother. “Come, Sundar! It is past midnight already. Soon it will be morning. You are only eight years old, my son. You must rest.”

Obediently, reverently the boy returns the holy books to their place and seeks his mat. The candle flickers one last time and dies. Later he remembers:

Although my family was Sikh, we had great reverence for the Hindu scriptures. My mother was a living example of the love of God and a devoted follower of Hindu teachings. Every day she awoke before dawn, prepared herself with the cold water of the ritual bath, and read either from the *Bhagavad Gita* or from one of the other sacred writings. Her pure life and her complete devotion influenced me more strongly than it did the other family members. From the time of my earliest memories, she impressed upon me one rule above all others: when I woke from sleep, my first duty was to pray to God for spiritual nourishment and blessings. Only then could I break the night's fast. Sometimes I objected to this rule and insisted on having breakfast first, but my mother would never relent. Usually with coaxing, but when necessary with force, she impressed this rule deep onto my soul: Seek God first and only then turn to other things.

At that time, I was too young to recognize the true value of this education, and I resisted her. Later, however, I came to appreciate her example. Whenever I think back now on her loving guidance, I cannot thank

God enough for her. For she planted in me, and tended in my early life, a profound love and fear of God. She carried a great light within her, and her heart was the best spiritual training anyone could have: “You must not be careless and worldly,” she would say. “Seek peace of soul, and love God always. Someday you must give yourself fully to the search, you must follow the way of the sadhu.”

With pleading eyes, the boy looks up at his father:

Please help her, Father! She is so old and the weather is turning cold. I spent all my pocket money to buy food for her, but I did not have enough for a blanket. Please give me money to buy her a blanket.

Sardar Sher Singh retorts:

Listen, Sundar! Over the years I have given that widow all manner of help. We are not responsible for her. The other people in town should also help look after her. They must also learn charity. You cannot be responsible for everyone all the time. Others must learn to play their part. Do not worry about her now. You have done more than enough for her.

Downcast, the boy turns away. Agony of conscience.

Has not Mother always said we should show compassion and pity? Has Father no heart? What if no one else helps her? She might freeze in the night. Is there nothing I can do? Maybe...No, I mustn't! That would be wrong. But then again, Father has so much; he will never miss a few rupees. It is for a good cause; I'm not stealing for myself...

Sundar was wrong. Father does miss it. In the evening, Sardar Sher Singh calls together the household and announces that he is missing five rupees. "Has anyone taken money from my purse?" he asks, gently but firmly. Each one answers in turn. Sundar quietly says, "No Father, I didn't do it." The day closes somber and unresolved.

Sundar sleeps fitfully. He tosses and turns. In his dreams, he sees the stern face of his father, hears the disappointment in his voice: "How could you steal from me, your father? How could you secretly disobey me? Even now, after I ask for the truth, still you lie to me." Sundar knows this is not *dharma*—devotion. This is *adharma*—sin.

It is evil. The holy books speak of *karma*—the relentless cycle of sin and death by whose law every sinful act

burdens the soul and carries painful consequences. The holy books warn that we will reap what we sow, in this life or the next. How can I escape this karma? How can I undo what I have done? What good is compassion for others in need if my own soul is burdened?

Sardar Sher Singh hears a quiet, frightened voice:

Father! Wake up, Father! Something terrible has happened. It was I, Father. I stole your money to buy a blanket for the widow. Forgive me, Father. I want to escape the karma; I am ready to accept punishment; I am ready to accept it as penance for this sin.

Now awake, Sardar Sher Singh sees the anguish in the boy's face and sees the hours of anguish behind it. He takes hold of the boy—not to punish him, but to take him up into his strong arms; not with anger, but with love. Gently he says: “I have always trusted you, my child, and now I have good proof that my trust was not misplaced. Sleep in peace now, for you have shown courage to choose what is right. In this way, you have turned the wrong to good. I, too, am sorry that I refused you money for the widow. I will not refuse you such a request again.”



PARABLE

five holy men

Once in Haridwar I met a sadhu lying on a bed of nails. I went to him and asked, "To what end do you wound and torture yourself so?" He answered:

You are a sadhu yourself. Do you not know why I do this? It is my penance. I am destroying the flesh and its desires. I serve God in this way, but I still feel all too clearly the pain of my sins and the evil in my desires. Indeed, the pain of them is far worse than the pain of these nails. My goal is to kill all desire and so to find release from myself and oneness with God. I have been exercising this discipline for eighteen months, but I have not yet reached my goal. Indeed, it is not possible to find release in such a short time; it will take many years, even many lives, before I can hope for release.

I considered the life of this man. Must we torture ourselves through many lives in order to find true peace? If we do not reach our goal in this life, why should there be another chance in another life? Is it even possible in thousands on thousands of lives? Can such peace ever be found through our own efforts? Must it not be a gift from God? Surely we must seek the life of God, not the death of flesh.

I met another sadhu doing penance. His feet were tied with a rope and he was hanging upside down from the branch of a tree. When he had ended his exercise and was resting under the tree, I asked him, "Why do you do this? What is the purpose of such torture?" He answered:

People are greatly amazed to see me hanging head-down from a tree, but remember, the Creator sets every child head-down in the mother's womb. This is my method to serve God and do penance. In the eyes of the world it is folly, but in this exercise I remind myself and others that all of us are bound by sin and lead lives that are, in God's eyes, upside down. I seek to turn myself upside down again and again until in the end I stand upright in the sight of God.

It is true that the world is upside down and its ways are perverted. But can we ever hope to right ourselves through our own strength? Must we not turn instead to God, who alone can set right what is wrong and free us from evil thoughts and desires?

Later, I met yet another sadhu. In the hot summer, he would continually sit within the five fires—that is, with four fires around him and the burning sun overhead. In winter he would stand for hours in the icy water. Yet his whole expression was marked by sadness and despair. I learned that the man had been undergoing this exercise for five years. I approached him and asked: “What have you gained from this discipline? What have you learned?” He answered sadly, “I do not hope to gain or learn anything in this present life, and about the future I can say nothing.”

The following day I went to see a sadhu who had taken an oath of silence. He was a genuine seeker after truth. He had not spoken for six years. I went to him and asked him questions: “Did God not give us tongues so that we can speak? Why do you not use yours to worship and praise the Creator instead of remaining silent?” Without any hint of pride or arrogance he answered me by writing on a slate:

You are right, but my nature is so evil that I cannot hope for anything good to come out of my mouth. I have remained silent for six years, but my nature remains evil, so it is better that I remain silent until I receive some blessing or message that can help others.

Once in the Himalayas I learned of a Buddhist hermit, an old lama who lived in a cave in the mountains. He had closed off the entrance of the cave by building a stone wall—leaving only

a small opening for air. He never left the cave and lived only from the tea and roasted barley that devout people brought and passed through the small hole. Because he had lived so long in utter darkness, he had become blind. He was determined to remain in the cave for the rest of his life. When I found this hermit, he was engaged in prayer and meditation, so I waited outside until he had finished. Then I asked if I might speak with him, and we were able to converse through the hole in the wall, although we could not see each other. First he asked me about my spiritual journey. Then I asked him, "What have you gained through your seclusion and meditation? Buddha taught nothing about a God to whom we can pray. To whom do you pray, then?" He answered:

I pray to Buddha, but I do not hope to gain anything by praying and by living in seclusion. Quite the opposite, I seek release from all thought of gain. I seek nirvana, the elimination of all feeling and all desire—whether of pain or of peace. But still I live in spiritual darkness. I do not know what the end will be, but I am sure that whatever I now lack will be attained in another life.

I then responded:

Surely your longings and feelings arise from the God who created you. They were surely created in order to be fulfilled, not crushed. The destruction of all desire cannot lead to

