Selections from
With a Great Master in India

By

Julian Johnson

Hazur Maharaj Baba Sawan Singh
1858-1948
Preface

- Born in Kentucky in 1873
- Grew up in a staunch Christian family, became a Baptist minister at age 17
- At the age of 22 served for three years as a Christian missionary to India
- Earned a master’s degree in theology, resigned his 17-year Baptist ministry, and earned an M.D. from the State University of Iowa
- Served as an assistant surgeon in the United States Navy during World War 1
- Built a hospital and developed a private surgical practice
- Owned and flew his own airplanes
- Read *Radha Soami Mat Prakash* while visiting an initiate of Sawan Singh
- Initiated on March 21, 1931
- A year after initiation Johnson closed his medical practice and sailed for India, where he lived at the Dera Baba Jaimal Singh, in Beas with his Master Sawan Singh
- In 1934 he authored *With a Great Master in India*, the first book on Surat Shabd Yoga by a Westerner
- Wrote *Path of the Masters*, published in 1939.
- In 1939 Johnson died on his way to the hospital after he tripped and hit his head on a rock during a heated debate with a friend over health treatments

The following pages contain excerpts from a series of letters written to friends and fellow students in America during the first fourteen months of his sojourn with the Master, Hazur Baba Sawan Singh.
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Meeting the Master

It took me two nights and one day, by fast mail train (from Calcutta); and so, about six o’clock Thursday morning, June 2 (1932), I arrived in Jullundur City, a nice little city about twenty-seven miles from Beas. Two of the Master’s most intimate helpers met me at the train. One was his private secretary, Rai Sahib, and the other was Sardar Bhagat Singh, an attorney or advocate in Jullundur City.

The greatest of all surprises awaited me as I entered the home of the attorney and stood face to face with the Master himself. They had not informed me that he was there. I expected to have to go on to the retreat at Beas to meet him. But he was so kind as to come on to Jullundur City even the night before, so as to be there to meet me and extend his gracious welcome.

The attorney introduced me by saying: “And here is the beloved Master you have come so far to see.”

But I would have known he was the Master, if no word had been spoken. There is no one like him. I was simply unable to speak, scarcely able to think. I just grasped his hand and stood there.

After a while, I was able to tell him that I was most happy to have this privilege of meeting him. I do not know just what he said, but it was something about me being most welcome. It seemed that I stood there in a sort of daze but quite happy. A sense of great peace had come into my soul.
First Impression of the Master

And now I wish I could really describe him to you or tell you of my impressions. But did you ever try to describe a beautiful sunset? I was expecting to see an unusual man. I knew he had a long white beard. I knew he was an elderly man and an East Indian.

The color of his skin is about that of the average American with a good coat of suntan. He is five feet nine inches tall and weighs 128 pounds. He wears a tall white turban and his general bearing is that of natural born nobility. No king would be more graceful and dignified, and yet that dignity is so tempered with sweet humility that one is drawn to him.

His voice is low and clear as silver bells. His smile is extremely gracious and one can see that his heart holds loving-kindness for all.

After an hour with him, about all I could do was to just sit and think of his face. I could think of nothing else. I could still feel the vibrating music of his voice. I could fancy the whole environment was permeated by a peculiar light.

Since seeing him I can think of nothing else. His image lingers before me all the while. I have never seen such a face before, nor imagined there was one like it among the sons of men. If ever there was a face combining old age (he is now seventy-four years of age) with beauty, majesty and calm power, it is his.
But beyond all of that there is a sort of spiritual radiance which no words can describe, but which gives one a feeling of deep peace, as if the discords of earth were no longer possible in his presence.

As you look into his face you lose all desire to talk, even ask questions. You simply absorb the light. His voice is vibrant with love and his smile seems as if it lights up the room.

He is as simple in manner as a little child, with no sort of pose or air about him. He always appears as if he regretted being the center of an adoring crowd. His spirit of good fellowship is enchanting.

His manner toward all of us is like that of a mother comforting her tired children and soothing them to rest. His manifest love is his supreme quality, as it appears to me, and that is also the very essence of his gospel.
A Great Monthly Satsang

At four in the afternoon I bade adieu to our worthy friend the lawyer, and the Master, and left with Master’s secretary for the retreat at Beas. Dera really means “tent.” It was originally the hermitage of Baba Jaimal Singh, who was Guru to our Master. Now the place is called Dera Baba Jaimal Singh in honor of him.

Last Sunday was the time of the regular monthly gathering, and over 8,000 people were here, they say. There were 2,000 people applying for initiation, and of that number the Master accepted and initiated 740 souls. And of the total number initiated, two – and they were both women – were able to see inner light during the devotional period which followed the initiation.

You will no doubt be interested and perhaps amused when I tell you that promptly at three o’clock this morning, at the ringing of a bell or gong, I got up and sat for devotion for a period of three hours. It was never so very easy for me to get up early in the morning, unless it was to go to the surgery for an emergency operation.

Here at the Dera the Master always rises at three o’clock in the morning for his devotions, and he generally sits until six in the summer time, and until eight in the winter.

Most of the others do not sit so long. This is not compulsory on anyone; but all do it out of their love for the Master, because they know it is his wish.

The Master regards the sitting as the most important of all our activities.
A Journey into Higher Regions

I shall never forget another evening which I spent on the roof with a small bunch of the Master’s most beloved disciples, and we listened to a lady give a detailed account of her spiritual experiences, what she saw and heard during her journey through the first, second and third regions, and up to where she entered the region just beyond Daswan Dwar.

The only trouble with the account was that the interpreters became so absorbed in the story themselves that they almost forgot to tell it to me. This was a rare privilege, as disciples are generally forbidden to relate their inner experiences to others. But on this occasion we had special permission from the Master. And this is only one instance of how kind and gracious he is to everyone.

It will be impossible for me now to give you even a resume of this story. Perhaps some time I may do so. But it made the journey ahead of us all a more vital and fascinating undertaking, thrilling to the last word.

One could see the light of truth and joy shining in her face as she told in simple language of the marvels she had seen. But she paused to say that there were no words in earth language to describe many of the things to be met with there. They were utterly unlike anything familiar to earth travelers. But she told her amazing story with such unhesitating assurance of reality that it carried conviction. I believe she has been about fifteen years on the Path and is much loved by all who know her. She appears to be about forty-five years of age. Her name is Bibi Rakhi.
Hard to Remain Here in the Body

One day the Master seemed a bit sad and I asked him if he did not feel well. He said, yes, he felt all right. And then he went on talking about the higher regions, how the soul so much disliked to come down here and put on dirty rags, when it was used to wearing the finest robes in the palaces of the Father’s kingdom.

He said, “It is hard to remain here in the body.” On another occasion the Master remarked that if one looks down upon this world from the higher regions, it all resembles a bunch of garbage cans and outhouses, in comparison. The very atmosphere seems poisoned and so dark in comparison with the fair lands above.

So it is difficult even for the unselfish Master to remain away from home and live in this low land of shadow and uncleanness. Only his great love for human souls who so much need his help detains him here.

But there is one great compensation which he has even now. He may daily visit his splendid mansions above and converse with the glorified inhabitants of that region. The joy of that then sustains him through all of his arduous labor here. He knows it is only a matter of time until his work will be finished here and he will take up his permanent residence there.
Ninety-One Years a Satsangi

I must mention an old satsangi who is a faithful attendant at all of the meetings. He is 109 years of age and was initiated by Soami Ji himself, the founder of this science, some 90 years ago.

He is a bit stooped and feeble now, but is able to attend all of the meetings. He walks to them all and sits as close to the Master as he can get. One day I asked him if he was happy and he said, “Oh yes, of course.” Day after day he sits, the joy-bells ringing through his soul, waiting patiently for his release. He is very thin. Evidently not much of his time does he put in consciously down here, when he can withdraw from the body and rest in those bright upper regions with which he is already quite familiar.
Aside from the Master himself, I try again and again to compare this system of truth with other teachings, and daily I am more and more amazed at its solemn grandeur. It is like the peaks of the Himalayas, only a few hundred miles north of us. It is monumental, gigantic, overwhelming.

But no man can absorb it all at once. At first there will be doubts and many things will astonish the student. Later he will come to wonder why all the world has not seen its truth and hastened to make it their own. It is so obviously true.

After floundering about in a vortex of religious and philosophical speculation for a half-century, I am prepared to welcome this teaching with more than ordinary gladness. When one gets even a feeble grasp of its fundamentals he simply knows it is true. It is so clearly rational and it meets all demands of both reason and intuition. It is a scientific fact and it solves all of the problems of life, here and hereafter; and they are solved in such a beautiful and simple manner that one instinctively knows he has reached the final solution.

And the center and soul of it all is the gracious Master himself, now living among us. He goes on loving and teaching and helping us, leading us up over all the difficult places, up and up, until the last supreme height is reached and we merge our souls into the stream that gave us being, bathed in infinite light.
Two Important Things Learned

If you ask this disciple what is the most important thing he has learned during these two months spent with the Master, the answer must be that two things have taken prominent positions in his consciousness.

The first one is the supreme importance of the Master. This great truth grows upon one as he advances in the study. He finds more and more that the Master is the very center and soul and substance of the system. Without him there is nothing.

Without the personal intervention and help of a living Master, no one now or in any past age has ever been able to shake off the bonds of mind and matter and rise to higher regions. We are all utterly dependent upon his grace for our liberation. Without him each soul is as dependent and helpless as a newborn infant.

The second great truth so strongly emphasized here during the last two months of intensive study is the fact that egotism is our worst enemy. It is the most stubborn and difficult force to be overcome before we can make progress on the inward path. And it is also the last one to die when the disciple has fought his final battle and stands on the very threshold of perfect realization.

This is one of the five deadly foes that seek always to enchain us to the Wheel. It can be overcome only by the gracious help of the Satguru. Here again his vital importance to the student is manifest. Without him we struggle in vain against these five deadly enemies of the soul. They are the chief agents of the negative power, under the direction of the mind, to keep us bound to earth.
Side by Side with the Lord

Late one evening we took a train for our next stop at Mathura, the birthplace of Krishna. To all orthodox Hindus, this town is as sacred as Bethlehem is to the Christian. Our party took a third-class compartment, the Master refusing to leave his disciples for greater personal comforts. He never thinks of himself and is quite indifferent to physical hardships. So the dear Father had his bedding unrolled and lay on a hard bench, this disciple having the good fortune to be placed on the bench alongside of the Master, only a board between us.

As the disciple lay there during the long hours of the night, he found but little inclination to sleep. He was trying in his inmost being to realize the situation in its right proportions.

By his side lay the human form of the Lord of vast regions of light. He lay there so quietly, so utterly unpretentious, so humble; and yet in those bright upper regions so familiar to him, and through which he travels in the utmost splendor, his very garments are more gorgeous than any royal purple, and wherever he goes untold thousands bow down to him as their lord and king.

Notwithstanding all of that, here tonight he humbly rests on a hard wooden bench in a third-class railway car, while it rumbles along through the darkness and the dust. It is almost too much for human thought. But we know it is a literal fact.
The Master’s Keen Sense of Humor

The next day as we rode along in the jostling old car, the Master told a story of some foolish weavers who had a rickety, noisy old cart. One day when it ceased to make as much noise as usual, they concluded that it must be dead. So they stopped by the roadside and actually cremated the old cart, throwing the iron parts, as bones, into the river.

The Master laughed so heartily that it was a joy to us all. In fact he is always jolly and full of fun. He never fails to see the humorous side of things. He and his closest disciples laugh and joke much and there is seldom a dull moment. All are happy and have a good time.

Sant Mat Disciple Most Fortunate

This disciple wishes profoundly that it could come within the power of human words, either spoken or written, to convey a proper sense or estimate of the wealth we have come upon through initiation into Sant Mat. But the story can never be told. It must be experienced in the innermost depths of the soul.

You should permit nothing to ever cause you to deviate from this shining path. Full realization will come in due time, and perhaps sooner than you expect. Suddenly some day the golden glory will dawn upon you and then you will not need to have any man tell you aught of the path. The little spark that now draws you on will have become the infinite light, flooding all your souls with unutterable joy.
The Disciple’s Love for the Master

What is the divine mystery of the love of a disciple for his Master? It is one of the most absorbing themes of discipleship. It is something without a parallel in the ordinary walks of life. What is it? How can it be explained? What is the mystery of that holy bond which makes men and women even in the hour of death utterly forget all earthly ties and cling to the Master alone?

Fortunately this is one theme upon which this disciple can speak from personal experience, although he is well aware, perhaps because of that experience itself, that he can never give adequate expression to this theme.

Since coming to India, this disciple has been blessed with the daily companionship of many disciples whose devotion to the Master has written one of the most beautiful pages in the story of his life. Not only these, but the abiding devotion of the Master himself to his Master adds interest to the theme and crowns the relation itself with undying glory.

It is a sacred bond that, once formed, is never broken and its divine fragrance never diminishes through unnumbered years. But like other features of this holy path, the essence of it cannot be written down in words. It cannot be described in human language. To be understood, it must be experienced.
This is a relation almost too sacred to write about; but the following extract, taken from my diary, will be suggestive at least. This writer is deeply conscious of his own unworthiness, yet infinitely grateful to the Master for his loving-kindness.

October 5, 1932: Now, on the eve of our departure for Rawalpindi, the beloved Father enquired after all plans and arrangements, and ordered a change in the plan regarding my servant, so that he could remain with me tonight and help me in the morning.

Bless his holy name. No earthly father was ever more kind and solicitous even of the material comforts of his children. How can I bless him enough! If only I could serve him better.

How has he become my very life? It is a deep mystery, but an infinite joy. And how has this heavenly mystery come about in my life? It is so out of the beaten paths of ordinary experience. If the uninitiated were to read this, they would probable assume that the writer was a mooning girl sighing for the lover.

To the average Westerner it is quite beyond understanding. But all who have themselves walked this holy path know well that in all the world there is no relation so close and so sacred as that between Master and pupil. There is no other relation so crowned with the frenzy of divine joy.

When the disciple feels that every ray of light that radiates from the Master carries with it streams of life itself, he must love him. When he realizes in the depths of his being that the Master is the embodiment of the supreme essence, now engaged in recreating the disciple after the image and likeness of the ineffable Lord, then he knows that life without the Master would be an insufferable calamity. So his thought is always of the Master.
Sitting at His Feet

Some days ago this disciple sat at the feet of the beloved Master on the very edge of the bank of the Beas River. The Master sat in a chair and this disciple sat on the ground at his feet. Through all of India, and to the ends of the earth, there is no place so sacred as at the feet of a living saint. He who is privileged to sit there is blessed above all others.

To look into the eyes of divine love, to listen to his voice full of the resonance of the highest spiritual culture, to feel in the depths of one’s own soul the warm glow of his holy light – that is something never to be forgotten when once experienced. How precious the moments.

After a pilgrimage through the long and weary years, life after life, slowly emerging from the slime and the darkness of sin and ignorance, at last to sit at the feet of a living saint, and to know that never again shall the soul descend into the depths, but shall mount with the Master up to the regions of light.

Now after seven months with this dear Master, the American disciple feels that even the disciple himself no longer exists as a separate individual. Besides the Master, there is no one else. There is nothing. The Master is all there is.
The Master is All in All

Under the date of January 27, 1933, the following entry appears in the diary of this writer:

This morning the sun shines again in all of his golden glory. The Master has returned. I have seen him, have looked into his smiling eyes and heard his kindly voice in greeting. Life has returned, and the light of the world has dispelled the night of the soul.

For three weeks the sun shone not by day, and the moon and the stars gave not their light by night. The birds forgot their song, and only the shriek of things in the distant jungle broke the oppressive silence. Men came and went like ships passing each other in the night. Only in bhajan was there life and light; for the Master’s radiant form is always there, if the scales but fall from our eyes, that we may see. But this adorable earthly form was 150 miles away.

If any of my friends should feel that there is some exaggeration in these words, let them come in person to the Master. Let them live with him for eight months, watch his gracious ministry to thousands of eager disciples, behold his tender forgiveness extended to his erring children, receive his holy benediction upon their own feeble efforts, learn to love him as their father, savior, realize all of this, and tell me if there is exaggeration. They will probably say that without him, the world ceases to exist and time itself stands still.

This disciple daily grows more and more thankful that he has found the way to the Master’s holy feet. But the feelings of a disciple will probably remain an enigma to the average American until he himself becomes a disciple and has the same experiences with the Master.
Your Primary Aim in Life

This disciple is one busy boy here. I told the dear Master some days ago, if he would give me thirty-six hours a day in which to work, I would be glad to put in more time in the study of the language and other things of minor importance.

And let me say right here in the very beginning of this letter that every satsangi in the world who has been so fortunate as to get Nam from our Master should consider it his primary aim, purpose, and business in life to go inside and take up the journey to higher regions. To that, everything else must be subordinated, even the making of a living.

And if you make this your main objective in life, you need have no worries about business or other affairs. Do not forget that your Master is one with the supreme Lord and he will take care of you.

The Masters Follow the Supreme Will

The Masters do not find it consistent with the will of the supreme Father to use extraordinary powers to upset the usual routine of life and set in motion novel reforms. The Masters understand that the will of the Supreme is being carried out among the people. So they are content to let the supreme Father manage the world in his own way, and they themselves obey with loving submission whatever the Father directs them to do.

The management of the world may not suit us, but evidently suits the one who is doing the managing. So we had best leave it at that.

The Masters look upon the drama of human life from a vastly higher point of view than most of us, and so they understand it better. They are not in such a hurry as we are to work revolutionary changes. They accept the principle that the supreme Father is already doing the best that can be done for the people under the circumstances.
The Master at Home Again

On March 23 the Master returned to the Dera from his long tour. Great crowds gave him an enthusiastic welcome back home. The Dera without him is only a place with sacred memories. His loving greetings bring light and gladness to thousands who await his return. Already many have gathered for the monthly satsang.

The next day the place is swarming with visitors. Tents are set up and all buildings of the Dera are literally beehives of activity. Porches and verandas are full of cots and mats on which the people sleep. Thousands are coming and going.

The public kitchen is cooking vast kettles of rice and vegetables, and great stacks of chapattis.
Secret of the Master’s Powers

Some of the older and more advanced satsangis here tell this disciple that the secret of the Master’s power to draw all men to him can be known only after one has gone inside and has followed him to the higher regions. Then it becomes clear to him

Looking at him as a mere man, one can form no conception of his true greatness. But if you go inside and travel with him to and through those upper regions, then and then only do you see him as he is.

There, they say, it is no uncommon sight to witness hundreds of thousands of souls, all radiant in their own light, but all following him and bowing at his holy feet in loving adoration. They say that the throngs attending him there run even into millions, in one vast multitude. And the higher up you go with him, all the way up to Sach Khand, the greater he is seen to be.

He is literally and truly King of kings all the way through those regions of light. But returning to earth again, he never says a word of all of that himself and appears among us simply as a kindly, patient father, going about ministering to his children.
And so this afternoon when the Master had gone, this disciple turned and walked toward the jungle and the riverbank, where he sat down to think. His head was literally dizzy with the magnitude of the problem. We know that the Master is able to do any sort of a miracle that he may choose to perform, but he is himself the supreme miracle. We know it is so, and yet we ask how can it be? We know he is the superman toward whom all philosophy points as the goal of evolution. We know he is the embodiment of the noblest human aspirations.

But when you stand face to face with the living Master himself, when you grasp his hand, when his gracious smile and loving words make your own soul glad with an inexpressible delight, all philosophy vanishes from your mind and just the joy of his living presence remains.
Eight Hundred are Initiated

Finally the candidates for initiation were assembled, after the last public meeting had been held. After many had been rejected, the Master initiated eight hundred.

He personally inspects each and every one. Many are deferred. No one but the Master knows who is to be initiated and who deferred. He only glances at each one as they stand in line. It is a deep mystery to everyone else why this one or that one is deferred.

Sometimes there is sad disappointment, both to the applicant and to his people. But the deferred ones are told very kindly to come back some other time and in the meantime to give further study to the teachings and the duties and responsibilities of discipleship. Perhaps some of those deferred will be ready the next time or some years later.

But the Master knows instantly who is ready now. Only those who bear the mark are accepted. Only the Master knows what that mark is and he can see it at a glance. Everyone designated by the supreme Lord for the initiation is stamped by some unmistakable sign which the Master can recognize instantly. Only they get the initiation.
The Master Critically Studied

This little volume is in the nature of a personal testimonial to one of the greatest of Masters. After twenty-six months in daily personal association with him, and of the most critical study it is possible for a scientifically trained man to make of another human being, the writer sends out this testimonial with the utmost confidence that he is bearing witness to the mastership of one of the greatest, if not the very greatest, of all mahatmas who have ever graced this world with their loving presence.

While the author’s love for the Master has become the dominant factor in his life, it is believed that this love has in no way biased his estimate of the Master. He has shut his eyes to no facts which could be discovered. He has sought for evidence, both for and against. He has weighed in the balance carefully all points. He has watched keenly every little incident of the Master’s life. He has carefully studied the Master’s reactions under all circumstances, extending from his enthusiastic reception by multitudes of ten to fifteen thousand people, down to a personal attack by a hostile critic.

He has watched the Master while talking, eating, sleeping, walking among crowds and climbing mountains, traveling in motorcars and railway trains, and horseback riding. He has watched people worshipping him with the profoundest adoration, and he has seen others abusing him and seeking arguments with loud and bitter denunciations. He has seen the Master at the bedside of the sick and dying and at the funeral pyre of the dead. He has seen him enter and has followed him into the hovels of the poor, and he has gone with him into the mansions of the rich.

In all things, under all circumstances, he has never seen the Master at fault, so far as he could tell. He has never seen the Master exhibit any of the ordinary weaknesses of common men. As a man the Master is perfect, so far as twenty-six months of careful observation can determine. And as a Master, the preceding pages tell their own story.
This booklet is dedicated to Baba Sawan Singh’s spiritual successor -
the Beloved Master Param Sant Kirpal Singh Ji

1894-1974

He will live in the hearts of his disciples forever.

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