

The time for a spiritual life is now
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There was once a disciple of a Guru who was living a divine life of sadhana and seva in his Guru's ashram. One day, he went to his Guru and said, "Guruji, I want to live a spiritual life. I want to live in the service of God. I want to go beyond the binding chains of this mundane, materialistic world. But, I feel that I am not quite ready. My desires for a family, for material possessions and enjoyment are still too strong. Grant me some time to fulfill these wishes and then I will return to your holy feet."

So the Guru said, "No problem, my child. Go. Get married, have a family and acquire possessions. In ten years I will come for you. My blessings are with you."

With the blessings of his Guru, the man went out and quickly found a beautiful girl to marry. They had 3 beautiful children, and the man became financially successful.

After 10 years, there was a knock on the door of their home. The man's wife opened it to see a haggard-looking beggar standing on the doorstep. The beggar asked to see her husband. At first she started scolding the beggar, thinking that he was just there to beg for money. But, the husband realized that the beggar was his Guru so he lovingly invited him inside.

"I have come to take you away from this world of illusions now that you have fulfilled your desire of having a wife, family and earnings. Come with me, my son, let me show you the way to God."

But, the man looked at his Guru pitifully and he said, "Dear, Beloved, Guru. Yes, you are right. You have given me my 10 years ever so generously and with your blessings I have prospered. But, my children are very young and my wife would not be able to handle the burden of all of them alone. Allow me to stay another ten years until the children are old enough to care for themselves."

A true Guru will guide you to the path, show you the light and help when help is requested, but will never force a disciple — against the disciple's will — to follow any particular path. Thus, the man's Guru compassionately agreed, saying, "So be it, my son. Stay another 10 years until you feel that your mission is fulfilled."

Ten years later, the Guru returned to the home and again gave his disciple the call, "My child - I am here to take you away from this world of illusion. Your children are now grown. You have given 20 years to married life. Come now and embark on your spiritual journey."

However, the man fell at his Guru's feet and cried. He said, "My Divine Guru. Yes, it is true that 10 more years have slipped by, but you see that now my children are just finishing their education and they are just getting ready to marry. I cannot leave this householder world until I marry off my children and get them settled professionally. My youngest is fifteen, so if you could ever so graciously give me only ten more years, then all of my responsibilities will be complete."

"So be it, my child." The Guru said. "But remember that your true path is a spiritual path. Remember to keep your aim on God. Fulfill your duties but do not become too attached."

Ten years later, the Guru returned to the house to find a large bull-dog out front guarding the house. Immediately he recognized his disciple in the dog and saw — with his divine vision — that the man had passed away in an accident several years prior but, due to his intense protectiveness over his family and wealth, he had reincarnated as a guard dog. The Guru put his hand on the dog's head and said, "My child, now that you have regressed from a human to a dog due to your attachment to these worldly things, are you finally ready to come with me?"

The dog licked the hand of his Guru lovingly and said, "My beloved Guruji. You are right that it is my own attachment which has driven me to take birth as a dog, but you see my children have many enemies who are envious of their wealth and power. These enemies are very dangerous to my children and I must stay here to protect them. However, I am sure that within a few years everything will sort itself out and they will be fine. Give me just seven more years to protect them, then I am yours."

The Guru left and returned 7 years later.

This time, there was no dog out front and the home was filled with grandchildren running around. The Guru closed his eyes and saw with his divine vision that his disciple had taken birth in the form of a cobra, wedged into the wall near the family safe to guard the money. He called the grandchildren of the house: "My children," he said. "In the wall to the right of your safe, there is a cobra curled up in a small nook. Go there and bring the cobra to me. Do not kill it. It will not harm you, I promise. But, just break its back with a stick and then bring it to me." The children were incredulous, but went to the wall where the old man had directed them. Incredibly they saw that — just as the Guru had said — a cobra was curled up in the wall. Following his orders, they broke the cobra's back and carried it outside to the Guru. The Guru thanked the children, threw the cobra over his neck and left.

As he walked away carrying the cobra over his neck, the Guru spoke to the cobra, injured and aching, "My child, I am sorry for hurting you, but there was no other way. Thirty seven years and three births ago you left to taste the material world of sensual pleasures. But the ways of Maya are so alluring and so subtle that they trap us instantly.

You have wasted these lifetimes in the futile pursuit of material success and in attachment to people who also are only actors in the Cosmic Drama. My child, all here is Maya - Cosmic Illusion. It lures us into its trap, convincing us that it is real, permanent, everlasting and significant. But, in reality, the only thing which is real is Him, and the only true purpose of life is to get close to Him. These attachments merely divert our attention and focus away from the true purpose of life. I had no choice but to come to your rescue as I saw you sinking deeper and deeper into the clutches of Maya.”

So frequently in life we think, “Just one more year” and then I will simplify my life, minimizing luxuries. “Just one more year” and I will cut back on my time at the office to allow me to spend more time engaged in spiritual pursuits. “Just one more year” and I will dedicate more time to meditation, seva and sadhana. “Just one more year” and then I will delve into the divine depths of spirituality. “Just one more year” and then I will cut down on indulging in sensual pleasures.”...and on and on. But, that “one more year” never comes. We continue to put off valuable life-changes until “tomorrow;” unfortunately “tomorrow” never comes. Each day we again say, “From tomorrow I will begin.”

Our intentions are good. We want to be more spiritual. We want to devote more time to spiritual pursuits. We want to spend less, need less and serve more. We want to be the master over our lust, anger and greed rather than vice versa. Yet, we are deluded, deceived and blinded by the power of Maya. Thus, we continue to find excuses for why we must work 50 or 60 hour work-weeks, why we still have no time for meditation, why we can't squeeze a visit to holy places into our year's planning, and why we must continue to satiate our insatiable sensual urges. Then, we feel guilty for our lack of will power, and we again vow that “from tomorrow I will start.”

This lack of will power is frequently misconstrued as a lack of strength. It is not that. It is not actually weakness. Rather the lack of will power to implement the changes we know we should is due to the gripping, seizing, clutching power of Maya who wraps us so tightly in her soft, sweet-smelling, hypnotizing veil that we cannot see to the Truth that lies beyond. The veil of Maya intoxicates us in the allure of more and more....more and more wealth, more and more possessions, more and more sensual enjoyments. She casts her spell upon us and we follow, blindly, like the circus animal promised a reward for his jump through the hoop.

When we read spiritual literature, when we listen to the holy ones, when we spend a few moments in meditation and prayer, that veil is temporarily lifted and we can see where we need to go. Just as the man was able, whenever his Guru was present, to realize that ultimately he needed to leave the world and follow the Guru. However, the moment his Guru departed, the curtain of Maya dropped down again and the next act in the drama of his life unfolded as though there had been no intermission.

We are the same. We see where we need to go. We see what we need to do. We pledge over and over to implement the changes “next year” or “tomorrow.” Yet, the changes rarely come, for we continually get carried out on the waves of Maya back into the tossing, turning, cresting, falling, tumultuous ocean of samsara.

What to do then? Are we, as ever-so-suggestible humans destined to a life lived in the clutches of Maya? Are we destined to a life of only fleeting glimpses of the Truth? Are we to be forever imprisoned by her blinding and suffocating grip? No, no and no! We can break free. We can live in truth. In fact, the very nature of our existence, the very purpose of our human birth is to realize our ultimate divinity, to re-unite with that which is Divine, to break the chains of Maya. Anything less is a disservice to He who brought us into existence.

But how?

The only way to break free from the veil of illusion that Maya wraps around our minds is to surrender to God and beg Him to show us the true light and also to give us the strength to walk the path of light. Our personal, human willpower is, inherently, significantly weaker than the power of Maya. Alone, we cannot hope to break her chains. We cannot hope for Divine Realization or Illumination or even for a truly meaningful human existence. It is only by surrendering ourselves to God, by aligning ourselves with His ultimate and divine power that we can have the strength to walk the right path.

By relying solely on our own, human will-power, we will forever fail. The power of Maya is too great. However when we rely on the Divine power, we will forever succeed. When we rely on that power within us which is One with Him, we will neither fail nor fall. When we pray to Him -- with a pure, devout, pious heart -- for strength, the strength is given. Instantaneously. True, deep prayer melts away the chains of Maya and they fall to the wayside, powerless to bind us.

Yet, we must also remember that although God gives us the strength to break free from Maya and to both see and walk the divine path, we also have to put in the effort. It is not simply that we can say, “Okay, God. You give me the strength. I will do nothing.” For then, when our resolve fails and we slip back into our old, familiar ways, rather than blaming ourselves we blame God. We say, “Well God didn’t give me the strength,” or “God did not help me.” It is a dual effort, a joint effort. God gives the strength, but we must do the work. A famous saying is that “God helps those who help themselves.” This is absolutely true. We must pray to God for strength, but simultaneously we must vow to utilize all the strength He gives us.

Thus, the only way to break free from the blinding veil of Maya is a two-fold practice. First we must surrender to God and ardently pray for Him to take our lives in His hands, guiding us and giving us strength. Second, we must make AND STICK TO concrete

vows of how we are going to be better people. Rather than saying "I will find time to meditate" we must say "I will not leave for work without sitting in meditation and I will not sleep at night without doing my nightly introspection." Rather than saying, "I will try to visit holy places whenever I can," we must say "I will take a spiritual holiday this year." Rather than say, "I will try to cut back on my expenses so that my financial needs are less," we must say, "I will not buy another jacket or pair of shoes [or anything] until the ones that I have are broken, torn or no longer fit me." Rather than say, "I will try to overcome my anger, lust and greed," we must commit to having daily appointments with God in which we introspect on all the times we allowed ourselves to be overpowered by these emotions and we must pray for strength, DAILY, to be remain calm, peaceful and sattvic in our lives.

If we wait for the right time, that time will never come. The time for a spiritual life is now.