

KABIR

SONGS OF THE DIVINE



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Kabir: Songs of the Divine

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PREFACE

About a year ago as I was reviewing some prose translations of Kabir's *bhajans*, I thought it would be a good idea to produce a book of a large number of Kabir's poems. This book is the result. Although I was brought up in the *Kabir Panth* (Path), and my main language is English, there was no book available to me in English. When I was a student at the University of British Columbia in the late 1950's, a friend had a copy of Kabir's poems translated by the late Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore, of India. This was the first book of Kabir's poems that I read in English. I was delighted. Since then I have delved more deeply into Kabir's mysticism and feel that I have a good grasp of the message he wished to convey to the world. As president of the Kabir Association of Canada, I have had ample opportunities to give discourses on his teachings.

Kabir's message is essentially to know the Self, the eternal Spirit that is the core of our being. We are emanations of the Divine, but we do not realize it. It is our religious/spiritual duty to know who we really are, and remove ourselves from doubt and delusions. Kabir did not tolerate false piety, hypocrisy, superstition, and the externalities of religions. He exhorted us to awaken to Self-knowledge in this life and be free. We need to realize that we are never separate from God. He taught the equality of all, universal love and brotherhood, regardless

of religious, caste, or social status. In these poems you will note that he is always addressing the audience from a point of authority, yet he had no formal education. He spoke of what he realized. Great teachings such as Kabir's are a treasure for our development. They are like a torch lighting the way so we do not stumble on our journey. Kabir's poems are like that torch, showing us the path to Divinity. It is up to us to pay attention.

I feel delighted and privileged in producing this book of poems of one of the world's great spiritual geniuses. I owe a debt of gratitude to Chris Dube, editor/publisher of Urban Mystic Books for taking on the publication of this book. His suggestions, guidance and editing have been very valuable. I am also grateful to Sheila Barnes for allowing me to use her painting, *Swans in the Mist*, on the front cover of the book. I would also like to thank my wife Urmila for typing and proofreading the manuscript; Mahant Jagdish Das Shastri for assistance in the prose translation of some of the poems; and Mahant Arjun Doss for his write up on Kabir. It is my sincere hope that this book of poems will enrich the spiritual lives of its readers.

INTRODUCTION

Kabir: Mystic Saint

Kabir (1398–1518 CE) is one of the most famous mystic saints of India. His teachings have become important for people of all religions because he preached impartiality. In one of his famous couplets, he writes: *Kabir stands in the open market and seeks the welfare of all. He is neither friend nor enemy to anyone.* His desire was to teach people a true religion of the heart. He wanted to turn people from the empty ritualism of religion and to show them the inner path that leads to union with the Divine. In other words, he taught self-realization and loving devotion to the formless Divine that dwells within all. He taught and lived a combination of *Jnana Yoga* (Yoga of Spiritual Knowledge), *Bhakti Yoga* (Yoga of Loving Devotion), and *Karma Yoga* (Yoga of Action). All these stemmed from his own inner realization and identification with the Divine. He writes: *I went searching for the beautiful colour of my Beloved, and then discovered the colour manifesting everywhere. Even as I searched for it, I too had been coloured by its beautiful hue.* In another poem, he writes: *Uttering your name, I have become you. I have no individuality or ego left in me.* His own self-understanding asserted who he was: *I am neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. I am a five-element puppet in which divine power plays.*

Spheres of Influence

Kabir's influence on the development of the religious life of the people of India is quite substantial. He has been hailed the father of Hindi poetry. Prior to Kabir, scriptural teachings were generally in Sanskrit, a language confined to scholars and the priesthood and not understood by people at large. Kabir conveyed his spiritual teachings in the spoken language of the people so everyone could understand. For this reason, his couplets and songs are still sung by people all over India, as well as abroad.

Kabir initiated *Sant Mat*, the practice of spending time in the company of saintly people. He admonished people to give up their egos and seek the company of saintly people. There are now many branches of *Sant Mat* throughout the world.

Another practice initiated by Kabir is *Sahaj Yoga* or *Surat Shabd Yoga*, the path of natural union with God through meditation on the Word. This natural or easy union with God leads to *Sahaj Samadhi*, conscious realization of one's unity with God. One then sees God manifesting everywhere through his omnipresence. It is therefore easy to see why Kabir would conclude: *Friends! what is paramount is a natural state of union with God!*

Among some of his most telling influences, Kabir refined and clarified the devotional movement of Indian spirituality known as *bhakti*. He founded *Nirguna Bhakti*, the practice of loving devotion to the formless Divine. Prior to Kabir, *bhakti* had been practised and understood through the lens of *Sarguna Bhakti* or devotion to the multiple physical forms that the Divine took.

Kabir strongly emphasized vegetarianism so one would not inflict harm on other living creatures, since, he argued, their lives are as dear to them as our lives are to us. He writes: *Do not take life, the same life force*

pervades all. The sin of such actions will not leave you, even if you were to listen to millions of scriptures. Again: Just as you know pain within your self, realize other living beings feel pain the same way.

Another theme that recurs quite frequently in Kabir's poems is the need to realize the Self or Soul, the manifestation of the Divine in all of us and all beings. This realization produces *Enlightenment* and releases one from the clutches of *Maya* (the illusory power within creation).

Literary Style

Kabir was a fearless teacher. He spoke candidly to both religious and temporal authorities. He insisted on teaching people the truth about spirituality, and about the uselessness of empty rituals and practices. He was against all hypocrisy and caste distinctions. In his influential book *Kabir the Great Mystic*, Isaac Ezekiel writes: "Kabir's songs seek nobody's approbation. They seek no sanction, ask for no approval, search for no popularity, invite no commendation, crave no compliment. They stand independent of these considerations, and they constitute the most uninhibited literature, the freest of free writing ever produced by a saint . . . Banter, ridicule, sarcasm, wit and humour—these are the weapons he wields! Nor does he hesitate to hit straight-from-the-shoulder, hitting hard, ceaselessly and without stop, till the face of false piety and hypocrisy is battered out of shape and exposed to the view of the general public for general laughter." (Ezekiel. S.L. Sondhi: Beas, India: 1978, p64; p62)

The reason for Kabir's forceful and fearless language is easily understood when we realize just how much influence priestcraft had during his era. Religion had been reduced to a commercial activity, a means for priests to

earn a living and a following. The priests did not instruct people in the true way of life that religion intended. They scorned people of the lower castes who they further forbade from entering temples and from reading holy books. The priests themselves committed evil deeds and murder. They formulated elaborate rituals that had no meaning for the average person. Kabir observed this behaviour in both of the major religions, Hinduism and Islam. He felt strongly that there was no place for this behaviour in spiritual life. He therefore spoke out, often in confrontational and challenging language, trying to awaken people to the realization of their errors. He was famous for his contrary sayings (*ulta bani*) which challenged the priests to see if they had the spiritual wisdom to supply the right answers.

Kabir's teachings are now being taught in many schools and universities in India. Many people are able to quote him freely, including those who are not members of the *Kabir Panth* (religious and mystical path based on Kabir's teachings). Many of his couplets (*sakhis*) are quoted as popular wisdom in all parts of India. Kabir had a piercing wit and clarity of thought which has proved difficult to challenge. Many academic theses have been written on the life and works of Kabir. In addition to this research, other writers have written about Kabir and his teachings strictly out of the spiritual interest that his life and teachings elicit.

Translation

The poems in this book are translated from the original Hindi vernacular prevalent at the time of Kabir (1398–1518 CE). The spirit and content of the poems has been kept intact. Minor changes have been made so that the poems may read more easily and fluidly in English. This

eliminates the need for footnotes, enabling a smooth flow of ideas as one explores the poetry.

Horizon

In the poems, it is evident that Kabir placed a great emphasis on the immanence of God as something that we need to realize *now* rather than later, because, as he argues, we may never get the opportunity again. Without realizing God, we continue cycling in and out of the world of ignorance and suffering. Kabir admonishes us to extricate ourselves from the materialistic attachments and passions that keep us trapped in suffering. We need to be good stewards of God's gift of life and use it wisely without claiming ownership. In nearly all of Kabir's poems, there is a sense of urgency for us to realize God and be freed from the clutches of Illusion (*Maya*), the impacts of Cause and Effect (*Karma*), Time (*Kal*), and Death (*Yama*).

J. Das

POEMS



the fish in the water . . .

“The fish in the water is thirsty!”
When I hear these words, I break out in laughter.
Not knowing the soul, a person wanders aimlessly,
overturning holy cities—Mathura and Kashi,
just as the musk deer, smelling the musk in its navel,
sadly wanders the forest, searching for its source.
See the lotus in the water,
and in the lotus, the bud;
it is where the bee alights,
that nectar is gathered.
Bring your threefold nature into focus,
just as the ascetics and saints do.
Those who meditate on the Eternal,
like the great ones have done,
will discover the Eternal Teacher,
residing in their own hearts.
Right at this moment,
he is present with you,
yet you say he is far away.
A heart that embraces such folly knows sorrow.
Kabir says, “Listen to me brothers and sisters!
Without the True Teacher, your doubts will remain.”

every step you take . . .

Listen friends—sugar cubes dissolve in water.
That cherished body you don,
will one day follow suit.
So where did you come from,
and to where do you return?
Why live and die full of regrets?
You were born with fists clenched,
at death, you will depart with hands unclasped.
Who is your wife, and who is your husband?
Where did you establish such relationships?
Hitched to a restless mind,
the body's purpose remains hidden,
even when, try as you might,
to quench the flames of separation.
Whether you live for one day or two days,
or perhaps live to be fifty years old,
and maybe notch a hundred and twenty years,
in the end, you will meet death.
On this earth, every step you take,
brings you closer to death.
Kabir says, "Listen to me beloved ones!
It is the foolish ones who remain deceived."

appointment with death . . .

How long O mind!
will you avoid the Eternal Name?
Your childhood days are spent in play,
in adulthood, work keeps you busy.
Old age brings a quivering body,
encased in wrinkly sagging skin,
forcing you to lean on a stick to walk.
The scorching sun becomes unbearable,
your ears become deaf, your eyes dim,
as your teeth, day by day, slowly disappear.
Your wife turns her back on you,
and your son takes to slandering you:
“Old man! You prattle too much,
all day long, you lie around, dishevelled.”
Then finally, they’ll fetch you from your bed,
place you into the ground,
leaving all your treasures behind.
Kabir asks, “What will you do then,
when your appointment with death has come?”

keep the mirror polished . . .

O foolish one!
seek companionship with the Teacher.
You have pondered it, over and over again!
When the time to ford the river comes,
you will not be able to avoid the boatman,
or the necessity of traversing the worldly ocean,
releasing your worldly attachments.
If you desire a pure reflection,
keep the mirror polished;
a mirror soiled with dust and debris,
will not display a true reflection.
If perhaps you are praised,
your joy will only be transitory.
When the fort of the body is breached,
the soul embarks on its solitary journey.
Kabir says, "Friend, consider your actions;
the seeds of destruction lie within them.
If you do not untie the knot of karma,
death will grasp and plunder you."

fabric of the body . . .

Brother! the fabric of the body is very subtle,
woven as it is, with the essence of God's name.
It takes the energy of eight lotus vortices,
to spin the elements into such beautiful fabric,
nine solar, or ten lunar months, to tailor it;
yet, the uncaring despoil it with wanton stains.
Once completed, the garment is passed to the dyer
who applies colour to it with great skill,
rendering it beautifully resplendent.
Wear your garment with grateful care,
it is a gift to you, even if for a while.
The foolish do not know its secret,
and day by day, they innocently pollute it.
Sages of old wore the garment with care,
and in wearing it, kept it pure.
Kabir, the servant, wears the garment with care,
and relinquishes it in pristine condition.

renunciation . . .

Fellow traveller—
relinquishing attachment is no easy task!
You renounce home, don ascetic garb,
and yet still wander from house to house.
Forsaking sons, you then adopt disciples,
only proving, you are still in attachment's grip.
You give up lust, only to give anger free reign.
Renouncing anger, greed becomes the monster.
If you do succeed in relinquishing greed,
your ego rears up its wily head,
seeking the acclaim of fame and honour.
Let renunciation be of the mind.
Give up cherished attachments,
they are mere illusions.
Merge your consciousness with the Word.
Kabir says, "Listen to me dear ones!
it is a rare person who accepts this wisdom."

pure devotion . . .

O dear ones, how difficult it is,
to realize God in the heart;
yet, without realizing him, life is unfulfilled,
and in the end, our earthly days are over.
Be like the deer when enchanted by sound—
transfixed, she listens to the haunting melody,
then fearlessly surrenders her life to the hunter.
Be courageous like the chaste and loving wife—
giving up home, family, and life,
she proceeds to the funeral pyre,
and looking on without fear,
proceeds to follow her husband's soul.
Be determined like the fabled sparrow hawk—
though thirsty, she cries for water
that emanates from just one constellation.
Thirsting, she laments: "Why do I not die?
It is because I like no other water."
Be like the brave soldier facing battle—
as the armies clash, he fights bravely;
even when cut to pieces, falling to the ground,
he does not seek escape from battle.
Give up attachment to the body,
seek the reality of God fearlessly.
Kabir says, "Listen to me friends,
infuse such devotion into your hearts!"

in an instant of time . . .

My mind is aflame with God,
of what use are words and speech?
I have discovered the precious jewel,
and wrapped it carefully around a knot,
what need do I have to display it?
When the scale outweighs the article,
one needs to reweigh for assurance.
When the scale is weighed down,
what need is there for further weighing?
The mind distils the potent concoction,
swigs it down and becomes intoxicated,
never needing to measure the quantity imbibed.
When the swan finds the serene lake,
what need does it have for ponds and ditches?
Your teacher dwells in the heart,
what need do you have to peer outside yourself?
Kabir says, "Listen to me devoted ones,
I found the Teacher in an instant of time!"