



Rose Petals

Extracts from Sri Babuji's Satsangs

The Familiar Stranger

DEVOTEE: The love for the Sadguru is so different from love in the ordinary, worldly sense. Is it possible to describe or capture it in any way? It seems so mysterious.

GURUJI: There is no simple answer because your question implies so many things. What is a Sadguru? Why do we need a Sadguru? What is so-called 'ordinary love' and what is this 'mysterious love'? Is it really mysterious love or is it love of the mystery? All these things have to be answered to understand love for the Sadguru.



DEVOTEE: Guruji, please help me to understand the relationship between a devotee and the Sadguru.

GURUJI: First, start with your experience. You have suffering, you have frustration. Even though you have everything, you still feel there is something missing. You don't know what it is. Sometimes you think, "Maybe this is missing, maybe that is missing, and if I get it I'll be happy." Then you try for it and when you get it, you find there is still something lacking. You have money and all the comforts, good relationships, good parents, everything is there but still you're not happy. What is missing? "Love!" you say. "Yes, my children love me, my wife loves me and my husband loves me, I have a good family. I am loved, but still I seek love – what is that love? Oh, it's not love, it's something else: *Jnana!*" So you read books on Vedanta and become even more confused – still something is missing. What is that X factor? What is the value of that X? In whatever way you work the equation, you can't solve it for X, you can't find the right answer. So, your whole life is based on an incorrect formula. Then, when you come in contact with the Sadguru, you think, "Maybe this is the X," because he connects you to what you feel is missing in yourself.

That is why I call the Sadguru a 'familiar stranger' or 'strangely familiar'. We feel, "He looks so familiar, but he is so strange" and we don't know why he is like that. We feel he knows the intimate corners of our heart, but we do not know who he is or what he is doing. Is he static or dynamic? Does he love me or not? Is he doing anything or not? One minute he's so familiar and the next moment he's so strange. That mixture, that paradox of strangeness and familiarity, connects him to us, to what is really missing. Our experience of that strange familiarity is the first pull of the



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magnet, it is the triggering which brings us into the Sadguru's orbit. The process of removing that strangeness and making it more and more familiar – that is the 'concretization of our abstract sense of fulfilment'.¹ So what is that strangeness? What is that missing story? That is the mystery [missed-story]. Let us try to grasp it. The whole process of seeking fulfilment is trying to get hold of that missing story and trying to solve the mystery, whether it is solved finally or not. That is the path, the sadhana, the spiritual endeavour.



DEVOTEE: Even though I say love brought me here, still I feel I don't know what love is.

GURUJI: Not only you. I think many people do not know what love is. They think this is love or that is love. A boy and a girl look at each other: it's love at first sight. And then they say, "Oh, I love you, I love you so much!" After some time it becomes only a pattern, a habit, and slowly it withers away. Then they go on with their search for fulfilment. Some people want power or money. All these things are only a part of the exploration. Then, at some point, something happens and they feel, "Yes, this is what I want, this is my fulfilment." But even then, it is not yet really clear. For instance, take the example of Sri Ramana Maharshi. When he spoke about Arunachala, he said that even since the days of his innocence, since his childhood, he had had an inexplicable attraction to Arunachala, but he didn't know what Arunachala actually was, whether it was a hill, whether it was a name of God, or a person or a state, but somehow he felt that he knew it. Whenever he heard the name 'Arunachala' it felt so familiar, but at the same time it was so unfamiliar. So he began his exploration. He went to Arunachala and while he was there it became more familiar, but at the same time it remained so strange. There is also the example of Sai Baba. He was seeking a guru and the moment he saw him, he knew – Yes! Did he know anything about him, his antecedents, his precedents? Nothing. But something told him, he knew, "He is the one." That wasn't the end of the story, it was only the beginning. It only gave him a glimpse of something so ineffable, so mysterious, so strange, but at the same time something so familiar. Then he tried to make it more and more familiar. The more familiar we become with that strangeness, with that mystery, the more we want to know it. The experience of becoming more familiar with the mystery gives you the opportunity to experience and express what you really want: this is what actually gives you fulfilment. Love arises in the experience of fulfilment, and the expression of fulfilment is love.

So it is the strangeness which pushes you towards fulfilment and makes you explore it, experience it, and express it more and more. It gives you the thrill, the sense of mystery. If you lose the strangeness, you lose the pull to explore. It is that paradox of the 'strange' and the 'familiar' which makes your life more meaningful. We know it and yet we don't know it, we have it and yet we don't have it.

DEVOTEE: Is the sense of mystery there always, does it never go?

GURUJI: We'll see. Let's try to solve it first. Maybe it goes, maybe it doesn't, but that itself gives you a thrill. Not that the mystery is something painful. It's thrilling! That is why people enjoy thrillers or mystery novels.



¹ For the significance of this important term in Gururji's thought, see *Rose Petals*–2011.9 (Concretizing Fulfilment) and *Rose Petals*–2013.12 (The Transformation Process).

GURUJI: If at all there is anything mysterious or mystical, it is our experience that the Sadguru loves us. How do we know he loves us? Can we prove it? What are the reasons?

DEVOTEE: I feel it.

GURUJI: Yes, you feel it, you have the intuition that he loves you. The whole spiritual journey is based on that experience. When you experience something it can be expressed in any way. Some people express it in their actions, others by talking. Whatever way it is, is not important. The thing is, how do you experience it? Something tells us, something is triggered inside, something abstract in our mind gets concretized. The other day, I was telling you about the familiar stranger. When we meet the Sadguru we have a feeling, a vague, abstract feeling that we know him and he knows us. In what way we do not know. He is totally a stranger. It is not possible to understand him, but somehow we feel that we know him. He is strange and at the same time familiar. It is a curious paradox. Usually, the more we know about somebody, the more the familiarity increases and the strangeness vanishes. But with a Sadguru, the more we know about him, the stranger and stranger he becomes. There is an innate attraction, love is triggered in us. The familiarity relates to the love, and the strangeness relates to the mind that tries to understand and absorb. It wants to love as he loves and become one with him. If at all anybody experiences anything, it is first the love. There is a sense of security, something that tells us, "He knows me and what is good for me." How do we know? We have a feeling, an intuition. There is no proof and it is futile to try to furnish proofs for it.



GURUJI: With the Sadguru, it is as if you have known him your whole life. But even if you stay with him for thirty, forty, fifty years, the fact is, you do not know him. He always remains a stranger, but at the same time he feels more familiar than anybody else in your life. Why? Again, no reason. All your reasoning will end up with no reason. [laughter]

DEVOTEE: Ungraspable. I find something both frustrating and enticing in that.

GURUJI: But that frustration is not like any other experience of frustration that we encounter. It is frustrating, but it also gives us joy and happiness. It seems as though we are solving the mystery, but actually the mystery only becomes magnified and absorbs us more and more. There is a story in Hindu mythology about Ravana [the demon King of Lanka] wanting to attain immortality by getting the *Atma Lingam*, so he asked Lord Siva for this boon. As a result of his ardent worship, Lord Siva granted the boon, on condition that the *Atma Lingam* should never touch the ground; once placed on the earth, all its powers would return to Lord Siva. Ravana started his journey back to Lanka with the *Atma Lingam*. Sage Narada feared that with its power Ravana would create havoc on earth. So he asked Lord Ganesha [the elephant god and son of Lord Siva] to play a trick on him in which Ganesha managed to place the *Atma Lingam* on the ground. Once installed on earth, nobody could move it, not even Lord Siva. The more Ravana tried to remove it, the bigger and bigger it became. Ravana wanted to disconnect the soul from earthly experience and become immortal. But the more you try to do it, the bigger the mystery becomes. So huge! [Guruji laughs]

DEVOTEE: Does the mystery ever get solved or does it go on growing?

GURUJI: That also you have to find out. [Guruji laughs]



DEVOTEE: Guruji, wouldn't it be a great benefit for us to get a glimpse of that experience, the state in which the Sadguru resides? Even if it's just the smallest glimpse, wouldn't it help to clarify what we are all searching for? [much laughter]

GURUJI: Once you have that glimpse, then fear disappears and you start loving the stranger. The glimpse invokes interest and curiosity in you, a sense of exploration and inquiry. Then you become an adventurer and you are pushed towards the goal. That glimpse will act as a trigger to make everything clearer – what you want, what you don't want, what you want more of – the goal becomes clear.



DEVOTEE: Our connection to the Sadguru seems so mysterious. Somehow I feel at home with you, but at the same time I'm also a little nervous.

GURUJI: Yes, there's fear involved in it. You're honest enough to say that you're afraid, but, in fact, all these people here have fear. [laughter]

DEVOTEE: Fear of what?

GURUJI: People have different words for it: fear of involvement, fear of losing our independence, fear of what will happen – there's a fear of the unknown. We feel safe with concepts like 'mukti', 'nirvana', and 'Who am I?' because nothing will happen! [Guruji laughs] So we happily play with these ideas and we're happy. But with the guru – it's dangerous! "Ah, be careful! Don't go near him! Stay in the crowd and just look at him from a distance." [laughter] Yes, it's true!

Actually, there's nothing one can do about the fear. The only thing you can do about it is to familiarize yourself with the strangeness. To most people here when they see me, it's as if I'm a familiar stranger; I don't know any other way to express it. Because in your heart you feel that you know me so intimately, but at the same time I am so strange to you. And the fear that you experience is towards that strangeness, that unknown. So everybody, with different degrees of intensity, is playing with this paradox: the 'familiar stranger', who is yet 'strangely familiar'. And that is the whole play, the whole game, the aesthetics and the joy of it. There is joy in the solving of the mystery, or even in failing to solve it. "Oh, we have solved it!" or "Ah! I realize I haven't solved it at all!" [laughter] All these things will come and go, along with the fear. As I told you, everyone has fear but with different degrees of intensity. The more you familiarize yourself with the strangeness, the more the fear diminishes. When that happens, you start loving the strangeness, and that paradox of strangeness and familiarity becomes the mystic element, the mystery, the missing story.

