



# ANAHATA CHAKRA SATSANGA

## Nine Gates Course Lessons

### *Sadhak* / Aspirant / Second Degree

#### **Introduction to the Rank**

In lessons 2.1-2.3, you will cultivate the good qualities that all spiritual aspirants should treasure. These include generosity, forbearance, patience, and contentment. A *sadhak* or *sadhaka* is one who takes the most efficient means to realization, one who has left the beginning stages behind and has firmly and decisively committed to the spiritual path. Confused and wavering consciousness departs, leaving only the sure, strong steps of self-discipline. The gemstone for this rank is citrine.

#### **Lesson 2.2: The Living Tradition**

At this stage in your journey, you have been touched by many types of suffering. As a wise seeker for truth, you have ached for the people around you as they suffered want, depression, anxiety, and physical distress. You have had your share of burdens in your own life. Sometimes, your spirituality has seemed a burden in itself, as it is more difficult to live a life of compassion and wisdom than to blindly follow the crowd. You have missed many material rewards as you sat in contemplation and read holy scriptures. Often, you kept vigil all alone, as those around you did not understand your craving for the spiritual life. You lost relationships with loved ones simply because they couldn't understand your need for meditation and silence. You bravely forged ahead, not knowing if or when your journey would ever come to an end.

You have now found a sure guide on your journey to liberation in the form of the gurus of the lineage, the teachings that they impart, and the community to which you now belong. The triple-braided cord of scriptural understanding, communion with your teachers, and practices of worship leads you forward into your future as a realized being. This cord keeps its connection to the past, not in a merely memorial way, but as a living tradition. We believe that the saints, the gurus, the sages who have gone before us do not exist merely as characters in nice stories from the past; rather, they actively look out for this community and speak to the present concerns of devotees. If we place an image of Ramakrishna or Sarada Maa, if we place an image of Shree Maa of Kamakhya or Swami Satyananda Saraswati, and if we pray to that image, we believe that answers will appear. The gurus of the lineage do not do all of the work for us. They cannot say the mantras for us, they cannot create a home shrine for us, and they cannot earn a decent living for us. But they can and do provide us with inspiration along the way, whether or not they reside in a physical body. They can show us the resources at our disposal, the means that we didn't know that we had. Their blessings do make a difference in our lives.

The syllable "gu" means shadows or darkness, and the syllable "ru" means dispersing or removing. So a "guru" is one who removes the darkness of ignorance. Our first gurus, as children, are

our mother and father, who prepare us for life in the best way that they know how. Next, we have our teachers in school, who teach us to read and write and give us basic knowledge of math, science, literature, and other subjects. If we are very lucky and have enough merit stored over the previous lifetimes, we will have a spiritual guru, a living person who shows us the way to liberation. Having a guru means that we no longer have to flounder around on our own, trying on different philosophies and religions. We can stop the preliminary experiments and move on to the work itself. The wavering consciousness departs, the doubt wanes, and the unproductive questioning stops, leaving only the good questioning. The good questioning is the questioning which is directed towards liberation, is directed towards living, thinking, and talking in the way most conducive to release from bondage. Having a guru means having a guide along the path. Without a guru, we wander aimlessly and unproductively. Having a guru means that we have someone to answer our questions, someone who speaks from experience and not mere ceremony.

Another aspect of the guru-shishya (guru-disciple) relationship is that the disciple *does not actually relinquish responsibility to the guru*. Swamiji points out most helpfully that the word for “grace” in Sanskrit is *kṛpā*, which means “do and get.” The guru can perform *sadhana* on behalf of the devotees, but eventually the devotees must learn to stand on their own two feet, so to speak. They must take up the practices themselves and internalize them. They must act on their own wisdom and intuition, following the teachings of the guru in a creative, active way. The disciple must make every effort to “become a cause of satisfaction to the guru” (*Guru Gita* v. 27, trans. Saraswati), but this must be done not in a slavish, robotic way, but out of a place of creative spirituality, as a full and responsible adult with many gifts and capacities. The disciples must always give more than they take, for to do so is to continue the living tradition, but they still need to live their own lives, except in the rare case of the one who has attained complete renunciation and taken monastic vows. In the dharmic traditions, the idea of a vicarious salvation through some sort of savior figure doesn’t work, because the disciple must be transformed into the image of the guru. When the idea of enlightenment becomes too passive, the devotees become lazy and worldly, and the dharma is not upheld.

The many scandals that have been used to attack the dharma traditions—cases where well-known gurus have been involved in financial and sexual abuse—have occurred because of a failure to understand the true nature of the guru-disciple relationship. In the eternal way of dharma, we respect guru as God, but we also believe that each disciple, given enough training and experience, given a significant ordeal of purification, will eventually attain to the state of liberation, either in this lifetime or the next. In other words, the nature of the guru’s heart is the nature of every heart. We are all divine beings who pray to divine beings with the hopes that divinity will reach its highest and most complete expression. We are not changing darkness into light, “sinner” into “saved,” we are bringing fullness to fullness, light to light. The true devotee is not made servile by prostrating him or herself at the guru’s feet: rather, through service, through giving, the devotee is crowned with glory and made complete. The devotee becomes godlike by serving the gods, by serving the guru. And yet the devotee must preserve a sense of responsibility, a sense of uniqueness, a sense of having an individuality that is valuable to the satsanga and the lineage. The proper guru-disciple relationship comes about when the guru seeks nothing other than the continued progress of the devotees, and the devotees, in return, seek

to do things to make the guru's life easier, by taking care of the few material needs that the guru has. In the ideal relationship, neither guru nor shishya lacks for anything.

It is sometimes said that the disciple who takes initiation should no longer follow any other teachings except those imparted by the lineage. It is certainly true that the devotee bent on liberation should not accept any teachings that *conflict* with the teachings of the guru. If some other spiritual teaching is harmonious with the guru's teaching and does not diminish it, it seems that the pagan rule, "An it harm none, do what thou wilt," should suffice. But outside teachings should only be pursued if one is keeping the spiritual activities prescribed by the lineage. In other words, such teachings should not be a *replacement* for the guru's instruction. Otherwise, the relationship is broken and we find ourselves back at square one. Many followers of the eternal dharma, otherwise known as Hinduism, find elements in common with paganism and pantheism, as these earth-centered traditions are closer to the root religion of humankind. Similarly, Hindus almost never take issue with modern science, since the belief in cyclical time does not conflict with scientific cosmology. Hindus easily take scientific findings in stride, as nothing in science conflicts with the dharmic worldview, since it, too, is based upon cause and effect, action and reaction. Metaphysically speaking, the traditions of dharma may be polytheistic, animistic, henotheistic, pantheistic, monotheistic, atheist, or some combination thereof. Having no central authority save the lineage, Hindus can be highly adaptable and resilient.

All of this is to highlight the extreme desirability of having a guru and a lineage to follow. Such a development catapults one's evolution forward much faster than would ever be achievable on the solitary path. Just behind behaving ethically and following one's duty, the next task should be to find a guru who can guide one across the threshold and into the living tradition. If you do not have a living guru, ask Lord Ganesha to show you the way. If you have trouble committing to a path, ask Ganesha to remove the obstacles that stand in your way. Ask Ganesha to remove the wavering thoughts. Ask Ganesha to still the mind and allow the mind to concentrate on its chosen ideal. If you pray in this manner daily, your guru will soon be revealed to you. You will find a pause within cyclical existence, a point of decision in which the fruitless wandering stops and the fruitful wandering begins. As you do this, you must also grow in your devotion to Lord Ganesha, so that the relationship is more warm and affectionate. To do this, you move beyond recitation of the 108 names and the japa practice that you were doing earlier. You begin to practice a short puja or worship ritual to the Remover of Obstacles.

You will find complete instructions in the index to the book, *At Ganapati's Feet*. You will notice that a few items are necessary to complete the puja. If possible, these items should be dedicated to puja alone. You may wish to collect them one item at a time. Indian shops in major cities and on the web will have specially designed puja items, but they can be expensive. If you can't afford a specially designed puja set, look around for items that can be re-purposed for puja. The basic items would include a water pot, a pitcher, an incense holder, a plate, a bell, a lamp, and an image of the deity. You will also need flowers, fruit, rice, and incense for each puja. Flowers gathered by hand are considered slightly more auspicious than store-bought flowers, but make sure you do not violate any laws or rules concerning gathering flowers in the wild. Similarly, offering handmade food is considered more auspicious than offering store-bought food. You might try some recipes for Indian sweets, like *modaka* or *gulab jam*, which are said to be Ganesha's favorites. Or you may offer Ganesha a portion of your

evening meal, which sanctifies the entire dining experience. Make sure not to taste the food before offering it, and try not to even smell the incense before it is offered to the Lord. Try not to put yourself before the deity. Above all, try to get into a rhythm of worship. Perhaps you always worship first thing in the morning or right after dinner. First try for once a week and then strive to make it daily. Set aside part of your home for worship activities. This would ideally be a separate room, but do the best with what you have. If you have small children, the shrine must be located up high to avoid burns: otherwise, keep the puja space low to the ground so you can sit on the floor.

As soon as you begin to get into a rhythm of worship, you will instantly encounter mental resistance, as surely as rain follows a storm cloud. A whining inner voice will rear its ugly head, saying, "Oh, but I don't want to get out of bed for puja. I'm so warm and comfortable." Or perhaps your voice will pose as a practical businessman, saying, "I would love to do puja: it's just that have so many things to do..." Or the inner voice will stoop as low as to blame your family, saying, "I would love to do puja, but, you know, the kids would just get in the way." The excuses that arise in the mind will be never-ending, and they will be completely tailored to your individual situation. They will all be quite reasonable and plausible, and you could be forgiven for believing them. But make no mistake about it: these grumbling inner voices do hinder your spiritual growth. Your spirituality must be backed by concrete actions if it is to grow, and the puja ritual is the cornerstone of dharmic spirituality. In order to counter these voices, you need not engage the inner dialogue any more than it has already progressed. If you engage the skeptical voices in your head, you will lose, most likely through some form of bargaining or procrastination. "I will just put it off until tomorrow," will be the mostly likely result. This will not be the loss of the war, just the loss of that particular battle.

In order to improve your chances of success, make sure that your puja materials are ready to go at a moment's notice. The incense is ready to hand, the lamps are filled with ghee or oil and have wicks, the flowers are ready to be placed, etc. Mentally prepare ahead of time by asking Ganesha to remove the obstacles for performing his puja! Picture yourself rising early in the morning or doing whatever you have decided to do. Cultivate a longing in your heart for serving Ganesha, feel intense desire and passion. Think about how much better you will feel after you have performed the puja. Eventually, the worship will come to seem an integral part of your life: you will not know how you managed so long without it. You will enjoy the calm inner space that the puja generates. You will enjoy the transformed vibrations in your home as you begin to see it as a temple.

You will want to keep ideally the whole home but especially the area around the shrine very clean. If the flowers have wilted, make sure to remove them and place them on the ground or in a compost pile. If the water is stale and dusty, make sure to replace it. Incense and lamps can be big mess-makers, so make sure to clean around your censor and lamps regularly. To make sure that wood surfaces are not damaged, you can purchase glass or ceramic tiles at a home center to decorate your puja area. If you do not grout them into place, you can easily remove them for cleaning in the sink. Brass, copper, and "German silver" items can be cleaned using salt and lime juice, or, if a brighter finish is desired, a cleanser with grit, such as Bar Keeper's Friend, works well. Deva means "shining one," so it is important to keep the area, well, shining.

Over time, you can upgrade your puja items by purchasing a larger idol, or murthi, or by adding new deities, or by buying new puja vessels. Try not to do this as a consumerist activity, but use the purchase as an occasion for spiritual advancement. You might say, “if I say three malas of Ganesh mantra per day for thirty days, I will allow myself to buy a new puja plate.” By setting goals and offering yourself a reward, you gear your psychology towards spiritual practice. Include the rest of your home in this activity as well, and try to become a tidier person in general. Your family or roommates will appreciate this as well! This also goes for your body. It is customary to bathe in the morning before puja, and traditional Indian clothing makes the experience more special. For men, this could be yoga pants with *kurta*, or a *dhoti* with shawl. For women, this could be a sari or yoga pants with kurta. A shawl can be a good accompaniment when saying puja in street clothes. What you put into your body matters: keep a vegetarian or vegan diet and avoid wearing leather. Reduce or eliminate alcohol consumption. Get daily exercise and practice yoga *asanas* (postures). These practices eliminate mental sluggishness and keep you feeling well so that you can do your best in all areas of life. You cannot do yourself or others any good if you are unhealthy in mind or body.

A critically important aspect of your practice is to *not expect results right away*. Your chanting will not be beautiful at first. You will have a hard time getting your lamps to light. Something will always go wrong: you can count on it. Just retain your composure and do your best to get through to the end of the puja. There will also be moments of indescribable beauty, when a ray of light comes through the window in just a certain way, when the deity seems to be looking directly at you, when you receive some new insight. Such things do happen: but resolve to worship whether or not those special experiences come. Resolve to worship whether you feel like it or not and whether it is “working” or not. You may excuse yourself from puja for major life events, like a death in the family or a serious injury or illness, but do not excuse yourself for a bad mood. Indeed, puja is the practice most likely to make you feel better. You will find that the whole rest of the day goes better when you have done your practice. This minor course adjustment in your life will make the greatest difference over time, and you will become a more kind, patient, loving, and generous person as you carry on the living tradition.

**Assignments. Complete these activities on your own. You need not submit any written feedback.**

1. Were you successful in performing Ganesha puja over the course of these lessons? If so, what allowed you to succeed? If not, what held you back?
2. What can you do to forward the work of the Anahata Chakra Satsanga and its parent organization, the Devi Mandir of Napa, CA? What tasks can you undertake to benefit the living tradition without having to be asked?

**Questions for Self-Reflection. If you are interested in moving through the formal system of ranks of the Satsanga, please forward your answers to the General Secretary of the Society.**

1. Before moving to the next lesson, complete Ganesha puja at least nine times and record a few notes about the practice. Did you have any breakthroughs? Did you have any misgivings or doubts? Take a photo of your home shrine and send electronically to the Satsanga along with your notes.
2. When did you first hear about Lord Ganesha? Was it in childhood, perhaps in the home of an Indian family? Did you see Lord Ganesha on a television show or movie? Do you think your earlier experiences could have planted a seed that is now bearing fruit? Why or why not?

### **Works Cited / For Further Reading**

Dillard-Wright, David (Janyananda Saraswati). *At Ganapati's Feet: Daily Life with the Elephant-Headed Deity*. Winchester, UK: Mantra Books, 2014.

*You will need the material in the appendix in order to complete this lesson.*

Saraswati, Swami Satyananda. *Shree Maa: The Guru and the Goddess*. Napa, CA: Devi Mandir, 1998.

*It is highly recommended that you read the first two parts of this book, the Kaśyapa Sutra with Swamiji's commentary and the Guru Gita. These scriptures will be explored in greater detail in later lessons.*