



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 2.3: The Tangled Web

Life weaves a tangled web in front of us, each strand a different path. Some strands wend their way through dark places, while others stick more closely to the light. Each strand has reversals and switchbacks, so it can be hard to tell whether or not a particular strand leads to the end, that last frayed edge before the great completion. We all seek to untangle the web, to make it to that last filament. But the task is very difficult, the work of lifetimes, the great untangling of the knot of the heart. We all seek release, to reach that final bliss, but it remains elusive.

Some of us seek to do the right things in life: go to the right schools, get the right job, buy a house in the right neighborhood. We end up as balls of despair cloaked in stress. It is hard to decide who has it worse: the person with big dreams who fails or the person with big dreams who succeeds. The plastic smile hides an abyss of emptiness. Others take a different route to what seems like happiness. We diminish the pain through drugs, through drinking, or through sex. This path has its consolations, but they never last. After the last rush, the last high, the last fuck, ordinary consciousness comes back with a vengeance. The dreary ordinariness of the world continues.

The only hope for release lies in stepping back from the web, in seeing the big picture, the way that the strands intersect with one another. The knot will never come untangled by tugging randomly here and there. One needs a bright light and a good pair of eyes. One must remain calm and work with intention. The light, the lamp, the flame: one of the oldest symbols for illumination. The lamp is quite literally the lamp we use in the puja ritual. But it is also the light of the mind, the inner fire.

But then every mind is a lamp: every mind sees the interior and exterior world. Why do some minds create more suffering for themselves while others seem to be able to let go? The Greek word for happiness is "eudaimonia," which means "having a good spirit." Some people seem to have a naturally good disposition: they trust that things will work out, they go around smiling and singing. The great philosopher and psychologist of religious experience, William James, called these people "healthy minded," as opposed to the depressed, melancholic types, who struggle with depression and hopelessness. James, himself, was not one of the healthy minded. Though such a brilliant person from

a brilliant family (his brother was the novelist, Henry James), William struggled with depression and contemplated suicide.

The key to defeating despair, as it turned out, was belief. Belief, he said, has a way of creating a virtuous cycle. If you believe that life is worth living, you will find, well, something to believe in. And even though you can't prove it logically, your life's purpose will keep you going. It doesn't have to be anything big: stamp collecting will do. It just has to be something that will get you out of bed in the morning. It has to be something that catches your attention and keeps it. It can be belief in a project, simply believing that you will finish it. Belief leads to even more belief, which leads to action, which leads to even more belief, and so forth. At some point you believed in these lessons, and now you are close to completing the sixth one. You enjoy the challenge of reading, studying, and applying what you have learned.

You have also made the acquaintance of Lord Ganesha, the most powerful friend you could ever have. He has given you a taste of what he can do: he has shown you how you can overcome large and small problems. He has given you visions of what your life can be. He has made you smile, perhaps for the first time in many months or years. He has restored your belief in life, in yourself, in your future. But, most importantly, he has just been present in your puja ritual. He has filled your heart with a great love, and that is how you knew he was there with you. You carried that love through the day to each person you met. Now you are ready to intensify that love, to move through more obstacles, to untangle the knots even more.

You will now begin to practice the three assignments. Each day, perhaps after puja or after having your morning coffee, you will ask the Lord for three assignments: one way to draw closer to God, one way to help someone else, and one way to solve a long-standing problem. You need not belabor the point. Just take note of one thing you can do in each of these three areas and complete it before the end of the day. You have been meaning to meditate on your lunch break: you get around to doing it. Your friend has been going through a tough time: you buy her a card and mail it. You have a large credit card debt: you make a payment that is larger than the minimum. It can be just that simple, and if you do this every day, you will see rapid change.

A lot of times, we think about liberation as being lifted out of the world, away from the world. We want to be rescued from this dirty, unforgiving place. And spirituality becomes a sort of escape. The three assignments teach us to dig deeper into the world rather than running away. Instead of looking away from our problems and the problems of our loved ones, we look directly at them. And we begin to take concrete steps, however small, to make those situations better. We cannot get away from suffering as long as we live in the material world. So rather than seeking to be saved from suffering, we should seek to find release in suffering. Not to glorify suffering or make ourselves martyrs, just to accept the reality of suffering and pain and face up to it. A problem, when encountered directly, becomes much smaller and more manageable.

Before completing this lesson, you will also intensify your mantra practice. The number nine symbolizes the city of the nine gates, the human body. It also symbolizes the first nine couples that gave birth to the human race, as recorded in the Bhagavata Purana. The digits in the perfect number, 27, add up to nine. It is derived by multiplying three by three by three. Accordingly, in this lesson we say Ganesha mantra three malas, three times a day, for three days. This can be a good way to make a new spiritual beginning. You may also wish to use the occasion to get rid of a bad habit from the past. As you say the

mantra with a greater number of repetitions, its significance will deepen for you. It will become almost automatic in your mind, becoming the context in which you live your life.

You may wish to contemplate an image of the dancing Ganesha for this exercise. Ganesha's father, Lord Shiva, is the lord of creation and destruction. Both Ganesha and Shiva are sometimes depicted with the damaru, the drum of creation. Creation unfolds according to primal sounds, and the drum symbolizes the primal sound, AUM, radiating outward through all of existence. AUM stands for creation, preservation, and destruction. As you chant the mantra, you tune into the basic vibrations of the universe. As you work, you work along with Lord Ganesha, remover of obstacles. You begin to time your steps with his: your efforts become more effective in this way.

The dancing Ganesha stays in motion, just like his devotees. Through undertaking this spiritual path, you have cast off the tamasic energies of sloth and self-destruction. You have moved into the rajasic and sattvic planes. By staying in motion in all areas of your life, you prevent the growth of negative karma. You dynamically engage with your career path, you keep your home clean and organized, and you diligently perform your spiritual disciplines. Ganesha moves through obstacles by inspiring *you* to greater action in your life. He is not a "savior" in the sense of doing the work for you: rather, he removes the dark thoughts and dark emotions so that you can move yourself to a better place in life. He is a friend along the journey, a co-creator with you of your chosen destiny.

And, make no mistake about it, you are indeed great. You are great because you have been given the privilege of worship. You are great, because you have moved through many lifetimes to bring you to this most auspicious moment in which you commune with the gods and the satsanga. Let this not become an occasion for pride: let it rather humble you that you have been chosen for such a mission. You have been selected by the universe for this great Work of moving into spiritual awareness, of making the world a better place, of tapping into your deepest purpose.

In the days, months, and years to come, you will falter many times. You will lose your focus many times. You will doubt many times. You will become adept, though, at *picking yourself up again*. Even great saints doubt, even great saints fail. All of existence is cyclical: we all have our ups and downs. The adept ones have just learned how to make the oscillations less jarring. Their faults have become so small that the average observer cannot see them. Their struggles remain so controlled as to be invisible. They learn how to move forward even in difficult circumstances.

The next time you find yourself feeling low, feeling uninspired, try this procedure. First say Ganesh mantra, then do puja. At the end of the puja, mentally offer up your doubts and confusion to the Lord. Have a brief silent meditation, and then go about your day. Perform routine work: this is not the time to begin a new project. Focus on taking the small steps that lie within your power, especially in the area that has given you the most trouble. Always prioritize the area of your life that is the most in disarray. By so doing, you will conquer procrastination and avoid the tendency to do only the work that makes you the most comfortable.

You will be very surprised at how much can change in a day's work. You may find some solution that you had never considered before, or you may just make incremental progress towards your goal. A little bit of meditation and a little bit of work will also make your mental outlook much brighter: you will see hope where you only saw despair before. You may still be a little fragile, but you will have learned how to deal with a negative emotional state in a constructive way. Some people go their whole lives without

learning this lesson. If you can master it, you will have a failsafe against dark times, a method by which to overcome circumstance.

As an additional assurance, the following dialogue will make your relationship to Lord Ganesha and the satsanga more clear. It will give you great strength of mind and character and remove all doubt. Read it meditatively and return to it whenever you feel discouraged:

This dialogue with the deva transpired after intense puja, japa, and meditation. It is believed to be a trustworthy revelation from the Lord when received with sincerity and faith.

Janyananda: Master, teach me the method by which I may reach an end to suffering, the path by which perfection can be obtained.

Ganesha: The ignorant wrongly believe that by bowing in devotion they bring shame upon themselves. They think it a disgrace to bow before divinity, as though it were beneath the dignity of human beings to prostrate before God. I tell you truly that when you enter into praise of God, the divine presence enters into you, so that all fullness returns to you. No debasement of human dignity occurs during worship: rather, by exalting the devas, mortals enter into their highest expression of goodness.

Janyananda: I take you to mean that the world of the devas is above and beyond the human world, as a realm of perfection and beauty. In order to perfect human powers, we must strive to reach the deva loka. Through sadhana, we make contact with the deva loka, and, indeed, actually live in it while we simultaneously live on earth.

Ganesha: Yes, but you must never think of the deva loka as having a separate existence, for it resides within all things. The shining ones are never far away, never remote or unobtainable. The second you call my name, I live within you. I honor even the most selfish prayer: for health, for wealth, for power, for prestige. Through selfish desire many have come to me. Through selfish desire, many have become great saints. I use desire as my vehicle, to draw all things into myself. This is one of the meanings of the many-armed deities: the bottomless desires of human beings represent so many pathways to divinity. Our arms reach out to you though you know them not.

Janyananda: So everyone comes to God through the means of captivation that appeals to that person? Can we say, then, that all paths lead to God, that all paths are equally good?

Ganesha: Some means are, indeed, more efficient, and lead to a less prolonged search. Each day you leave yourself your own inheritance. Each day you harvest what you sowed the day before. In order to have an advantageous position tomorrow, you must do your utmost today. Make only the best sacrifices. Do the best work. Perform the greatest sadhana. Give of the best that you have. No effort, no matter how small, ever goes wasted. You are the direct beneficiary of every deed in which you engage. In this way, you create yourself day by day.

Janyananda: I know this intellectually, but my mind and heart grow dull. I know that I ought to maintain my spiritual practices. I know that I should think only good thoughts, but my strength fades. I fall in and out of love with spirituality: I falter so easily. The slightest distraction throws me off balance entirely.

Ganesha: Not for nothing did Shri Krishna teach the truths of the spirit through the image of the battlefield. Not for nothing did my father, Lord Shiva, clothe himself with ashes from the crematory grounds. You must remember that you fight for life and death, that you engage in fierce struggle. You must compete as though you wanted to win, to overcome, to triumph. The devas march at your side, but you must take up arms yourself. Half-hearted efforts lead to half-realized results. Be unreasonable in your devotions. Be like a madman. Go beyond respectability. Risk becoming a laughingstock for God. The greatest rewards come from the greatest efforts. Do not be deceived by those who teach a doctrine of moderation, who view spirituality as one more technique for self-improvement. Do not be deceived by the false grace which promises something for nothing.

Janyananda: Sometimes I wonder whether I have made any progress at all, whether I am not going in circles rather than advancing in the spiritual life. I wonder whether my practice is just an elaborate fantasy, whether you are just an imaginary friend.

Ganesha: You are not the judge of your own progress. Do not wallow in remorse, depression, or despair. Your only job is to lose yourself in me. Your only task in life is to journey further and further into everlasting bliss. It does not matter whether you succeed in your own terms. It does not matter who does or does not follow you. You must remain focused on giving your all.

Janyananda: I think that I am beginning to understand. I promise to apply myself to the utmost as long as you promise to remain with me.

Ganesha: All you have to do is call my name, and I will be there. I will be your refuge, and I will make you a refuge for many. You cannot imagine now the miracles that wait for those who hope in me. *I will make the Satsanga my bulwark on the earth, and no evil will prevail against it.* When times of doubt arise, return to these words of mine and draw strength from them. Gaze on an image of me and offer prayers. I come to my devotees through such simple means. I will not fail those who trust in me.

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

1. Did you complete the three assignments exercise? What did you learn from your experience?
2. Did you complete the three day mantra exercise? What did you learn from your experience?

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. As you read the dialogue with Lord Ganesha, did any passages seem particularly related to your situation? Please describe how the dialogue affected you and how it changed your outlook.
2. Write down a few of the obstacles that you have in your life now or that you project will arise soon. Write a paragraph that describes your plan for dealing with the issue.

End of Rank Retreat

Schedule a time period of at least twenty four hours in duration. If possible, get away from your home to a hotel, retreat center, ashram, or place in nature. The retreat is designed to start in the evening and end the next evening, but you may alter the time period as necessary. For the duration of the retreat, avoid all forms of media. Tell loved ones about the retreat on a need-to-know basis.

Bathe and perform Ganesha puja, offering part of your evening meal to the Lord. Make sure that the meal is sattvic, with no meat, eggs, or onions. After eating and cleaning up, choose a portion of scripture for reading. This may be *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, one of the *Puranas*, or some other scripture to which you feel personally connected. You may read in your native language or chant the Sanskrit. Read for about an hour and then practice a half hour of silent meditation. If you feel tired, go to sleep, if not, continue to alternate between reading and meditation.

The next morning, bathe and practice yoga asanas for about an hour, using poses with which you are already familiar. This is not the time to try a difficult new posture. Offer a second Ganesha puja with all offerings. Re-read the Ganesha dialogue above. Eat a light brunch and enjoy a period of light exercise, such as a walk in the woods. Try to be quiet and keep to yourself. Do not go shopping or engage in conversation if at all possible. Meditate silently for a half hour and take a nap if you feel tired. By this time, it should be mid-afternoon.

Perform a third Ganesha puja, using the same procedure as before. Say the 108 names three times during the puja instead of once. Sit in silent meditation for an hour following the puja. While returning home, make a few simple resolutions to change your life for the better based on what you have learned during the retreat.