

Sri Chinmoy Centre

[HOME](#)[SRI CHINMOY](#)[OUR MEMBERS](#)[MEDITATION](#)[CONTACT US](#)[Welcome To Inspiration-Letters... »](#)[Log in](#)

Inspiration Letters 21

Sri Chinmoy, says about guys like me and cleanliness:

"Whose responsibility is it to keep the place clean: the boys' or the girls'?"
On the one hand, masculine pride prevents the boys from cleaning, and on the other hand, they are incapable. The boys feel that the girls have to do it. The girls feel that it is the boys' unpardonable incapacity. There are many things boys cannot do, but girls can do. I have to give a boy twenty-four hours to keep his room clean, but if I give a girl five minutes she will do it. What will take him twenty-four hours to do, she will do in five minutes. And his sense of cleanliness will differ from hers. He will say that his room is clean. But when you go there, you will be surprised."

—Sri Chinmoy, *The Significance Of A Smile* 



Enough said!

I was rooting through my stack of LPs yesterday, when I came across an LP entitled *Sri Chinmoy Sings Mantras from the Upanishads*.

I slipped it onto the turntable and listened to the voice of my Guru, as a much younger man. It is interesting how LPs capture a performer's living presence in a way that CDs and MP3s cannot. As the chants rolled off Guru's lips, I felt like I was right next to him, watching him play the harmonium as he expressed the sacred wealth of these ancient prayer-cries in his inimitable way. I don't know if these LPs have ever been transcribed into any format, but they are still circulating around the Centre. They are available, if you look. It would be worth buying an analog sound system just to hear these records.

Recently, I was rifling through my sock drawer, which is also my cassette tape drawer and filing "cabinet", when I came across a demo tape from Anuraga, a disciple music group which, alas, is no longer active. I got the tape as a hand-me-down at a disciple flea market. The demo tape was made as an unofficial recording, perhaps just for the original members of the band. There are less instrumentalists than were eventually featured on the final CD. It sounds like just one main vocalist, with two backups, a guitar and a synthesizer. One of the songs on the tape is *Namiche Aj*. I've never heard this song sung so soulfully. The arrangement which eventually made it to the CD is beautiful, but the demo tape is simpler, and more haunting. It's just two singers and a guitar. The guitar arrangement is simple, mesmerizing, with a slightly dark, smoky texture. In many of his poems and songs, Guru expressed his oneness with world suffering, the ridiculously confused and complicated human condition. I feel Guru's vast compassion-heart in this song, in this arrangement. I'm grateful I have this demo tape, from a group which no longer exists.

Here is Sri Chinmoy's translation of *Namiche Aj*:

Today, the flood of delight
Inundates me, my all.
All my bondage shackles
Are smashed and broken.
No more heart pangs,
No more darkness life.

—Sri Chinmoy, *Namiche Aj Ananda Plaban Mridul Paban* 

I found another tape right beside it, this one featuring Guru's 1984 Peace Concert in Melbourne, Australia. The

Navigation

- [Inspiration-Letters 16](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters 17](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters 15](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters 14](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters 13](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters XII](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters XI](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters X](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters IX](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters VIII](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters VII](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters VI](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters V](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters IV](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters III](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters II](#)
- ▶ [Inspiration Letters 18](#)
- ▶ [Inspiration Letters 19](#)
- [Inspiration Letters 20](#)
- [Inspiration Letters 21](#)
- [Inspiration-Letters I](#)
- [Authors](#)

tape concludes with Guru singing a soulful, original anthem to Australia. What strikes me about this song is Guru's deep oneness with the Australian consciousness, with the essence of Australia's spirituality. One of the main ways Sri Chinmoy offered spiritual light to the world was through appreciating men and women of real inspiration and selfless dedication. As Sri Ramakrishna traveled around Bengal to meet with humanitarians and artists who had offered something unique to Indian culture, even so Sri Chinmoy traversed the length and breadth of the world to appreciate and honour those who tried to make a positive difference in the human family. And while the praises he lauded on Australia are grand, I feel they come from the innermost depths of his heart, and from a true and deep understanding of how the soul of Australia is striving to offer its heart's light to the world.

As I said in the beginning of this essay, my room is long overdue for a sound spring cleaning. Maybe one of our appreciative *Inspiration-Letters* readers will come forward to tackle the Aegean stables! (Just kidding!) But I'm happy all the same that I live surrounded by these old tapes and records that contain the voice of my Master and his devotees.

Sri Chinmoy sowed many seeds of hope and love in many parts of the world. I look forward to one day seeing those seeds blossom, put down roots and grow into huge trees of fulfillment, even amidst the clutter and awkward gavottes of our lives.

Sincerely,
Mahiruha

Title montage: Pavitrata Taylor, Sri Chinmoy Centre Gallery

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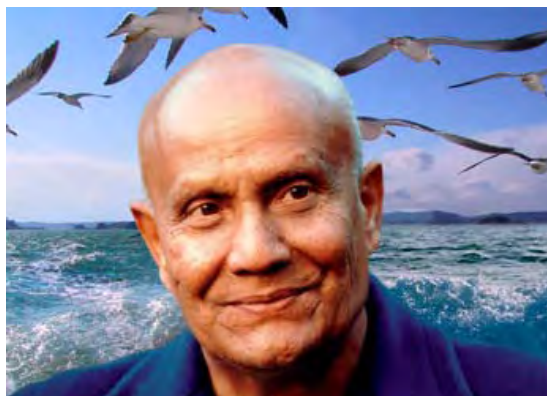
 <p>A Travellers Notes <i>Jogyata Dallas</i></p>	 <p>A Real Friend <i>Arpan Deangelo</i></p>
 <p>That's Not <i>All</i> She Wrote <i>Noivedya Juddery</i></p>	 <p>Cooking the Best Pasta the Real Italian Way <i>Priyadarshan Bontempi</i></p>
 <p>Trading places: If Tejvan were Frodo <i>Mahiruha Klein</i></p>	 <p>The Sky is a Storybook <i>Sharani Robins</i></p>

A Travellers Notes

by [Jogyata Dallas](#)

Wellington—New Zealand's capital city, ten hours away by car but only a short, usually bumpy one hour hop by plane. Our Auckland centre has been offering meditation classes each week, one of us over-nighting in a city hostel and returning on the morning red eye. Each night, travellers with rucksacks and laptops mill about in the roomy hostel lounge, swap stories over takeaways from the 'Little Asia' foodcourt.

In the class tonight, in the second row of seats, there is someone for whom I have a strong feeling of recognition—though I know I have not met him before. Can we remember someone from our own future? If time is an illusion, then why not? A future life also contained within the present, already lived and also yet to be lived—yes it is possible.



Post-class. Upstairs in the hostel's internet room, rows of silent backpackers fire off emails to anxious parents in far off continents ... tappity tap tap. Adventurers, they are resting up for a few days, restocking gear, poring over

maps of mountains. Huddled at tables they plot, their fingers tracing the topographical lines of hills and valleys, read contours as ridgelines stepping down into creek beds, see canyon walls and scree slides, seasoned eyes reading the pale blue veins of running water, a campsite here in this gravel wash, navigable routes up through forest to alpine passes, seeing dimension, altitude, bas-relief in this crumpled fold-out of the earth.

Audacious journeys. Around them the hostel walls are papered with postcard sized snaps of those who have ventured before them, their peers and trail blazers, beneath each a tick sheet of accomplishments, a travelogue of wild places—kayaked Queen Charlotte Sounds, traversed Heaphy track, swum with the dolphins at Coromandel, heli-skied, snow boarded at Mt. Hutt, sky dived, climbed in the Southern Alps, white water rafted the Mohaka River, bungied 130 metres straight down into the Buller gorge. They beam at the camera, testifying to life's goodness, Tibetan beanies crammed above their grinning faces, the boys' stubble jawed and ruddy, clothes tangy with wood smoke from alpine fires. Their names the names of their breed ... Rani, Gwin, Jojo, Aaron, Spike, Shaz, Cody. Adventurers.

I love those random and unexpected moments in a class when, through some conjunction of circumstance and sincerity and the Master's sudden grace you find yourself saying things that are simply not your own, beautiful and perfect things that carry the authority and power of divine truth and are merely conveyed through you. Moments too when your feeling of your Teacher is so strong that you can effortlessly break out of the usual constraints of thought and language to new heights and depths of expression and communication, not just through language but through the force of your soul which has risen up in response, carrying consciousness, integrity, truthfulness, the force of spirit into an encounter with another earnest heart. To speak with the voice of the soul gives tremendous joy, as though, at last, you have found and become your real Self.

Spike, dishevelled and tousle-headed, his picture grinning on the wall. Beneath, three snaps, daredevil moments salvaged from time—here in the first, abseiling down a sinkhole into the Waitomo caves, kick off to a 7 hour caving expedition, a human spider dangling on a single gossamer thread, bottoming out on a floor of shattered talus, then roping up and burrowing deeper, inching through crawl space that squeezes him into his fear. "Cavern ahead" says the guide from behind him, sensing dread ... "Stay cool bro". Spike in this second snap, gritted teeth, unsmiling, wondering ... 'Oh God, will I ever find my way back to beautiful sunlight ?'

As disciples, how immensely fortunate we are in the extent to which our inner life, our mindfulness of our soul's purpose is uppermost in every part of our life. We tend to take this for granted—but when we stand before a class full of seekers and remind them that we have come to earth with the single over-riding purpose of realizing God, of finding a happiness that can only be won through inner awakening and Self-remembering, that the value of everything else we do should finally be measured against this truth, the silence that follows is usually one of mild surprise.

Our discipleship grows inside us like a slow soul's sunrise and eventually engulfs each tiny moment—so that in everything of our life the values and feelings of spirituality become dominant, and ultimately the measure of all understanding and purpose.

This photo, a 1000 feet below the daylight: Spike wild-eyed with wonderment in an underworld of limestone beauty, headlamp illumining a kingdom of absolute silence, utter darkness. Navigating a gauntlet of sinkholes, ledges above vertiginous drops into subterranean black rivers, his own nameless fears. Touching pillared columns of cretaceous limestone; gargoyles frozen in their ancient sleep; weeping, sinuous stalagmites; then caverns, cathedrals of immense size, their overhead blazing with the riotous blue lights of glow worms like a night sky. 'Magical, ever so cool' writes Spike the survivor.

The teaching of meditation—or rather the sharing of what has been gifted to us—is surely one of the special privileges we all have. In an increasingly faceless, electronic world where information has become separated from a human informant, knowledge impersonalized, denatured and divorced from inspiration and the authority of oral transmission, the opportunity to bring heart and anecdote and livingness into our class rooms, into technique and theory is most important if we are to effect anything lasting or meaningful. A peaceful face, a caring heart, a pure smile of the soul are the best things to share—these are the most persuasive fruits of meditation and surpass language as a form of sharing and teaching. We have yet to discover the power we have been given, the force of consciousness, to positively change our world. For disciples, this is the new frontier. Guru reminds us again and again that we are each a very special dream of God—in the class room when we share our inspiration with others, this mantra helps us to be exemplary, to embody discipleship to our deepest capacity, to light up the room with heart. For only the heart can touch another heart and make a lasting difference....

Her photo. Perfectly weighted, Rani, someone's daughter, frozen above the gorge at the beginning of her long downward tumble, falling 130 metres into the Buller River, her mouth open in a soundless long scream, her terror and delight. The cold water brushes her face, a rivers caress, then the long umbilical bungee chord hauls her back up into flight, weightless, a soaring bird, her vestigial wings outstretched in supplication, more, more,

let me fly away into this beautiful sky. In her keepsake photo, Rani the exultant, sun-burnished and brown as an acorn, hair curdled by rain. 'Absolutely awesome' she writes home. Her pleased laughter fills the dark canyon.

Guru gave us many little gold nuggets to light up our way. Seeing the Supreme in ourselves, and seeing the Supreme in others, for example. In our classes, the awakening souls in all of these seekers have brought them from far and wide to take a further step on their Godward journey—God is the Supreme Guest, and you have been entrusted with a sacred task. What can you say that will convey most memorably, most powerfully the benefits and beauty of the spiritual life ... where is that part of you that will most embody and reveal it ... what can you offer that will make them want to come back?

Cody Shaw, 21, American, sits motionless in his kayak, below him a thousand vertical metres of ocean, sees with eyes closed the drowned landscapes, submarine mountains, fiords sculpted by ancient glaciers, the black sea teeming with clouds of embryonic life forms—plankton, protozoa, diatoms, spiny things, the ragged claws. The sea rises and falls beneath him, its undulations gentle and hypnotic, the breathing sea, alive.

Nearby and silent, his group on the five hour night crossing of Dusky Sound are also listening, the tiny prow lights of their sea kayaks like glow worms against the indistinguishable blackness of ocean, mountains, sky. His mind circles around, trawling the darkness, the inner spaces, wanting to comprehend, to feel deeply into the heart of everything.

The universe sparkles above him—an inverted sliver of pale moon; micaceous stars; a swathe of flung talcum, the numinous cloud of the Milky Way, mesmerizing, wondrous. In his plastic bubble, riding the black ocean in this immense canvas of night, he feels both the finite and the infinite, this fragile moment, the glaring constraints of comprehension, the great vault of sky, inanity of mind, the nameless longings and measureless dimensions, the heaving sea.

At midnight, a self-portrait, recoiling from the camera's flare—his face a white orb against the featureless, unrelenting darkness, curiously vacant, a ghosts pale stare at the window.

I would like one day to offer a meditation class here in the backpackers hostel, a journey within, travelling together the interior landscapes, the wild places of the mind, finding our way to the inner silences, the places of stillness. All journeys arrive at this peaceful destination.

A Real Friend

by Arpan DeAngelo

We all need friends, or at least one friend. Sometimes friends come and go. Sometimes they may not act like friends, or they may not be able to live up to what we may expect from friends. Friends also need friends. Perhaps if we all had the same friend then we would not need so many friends. But how do we know which friend is reliable; which friend really understands our wants and needs and is available to help us when we are in need?

I think most of us eventually find out that we should not expect too much from our human friends. We also may have some animal friends that are quite loyal and comforting, and even though they are not likely to desert us like human friends sometimes do, they too will eventually pass away. That does not mean we should not have those friends, but perhaps it would be a good idea also to find an Eternal Friend; one who will always be our friend, one who knows us fully; who we are and what we need.

In the following poem by Sri Chinmoy I found an answer to some of these queries:

*You are my real Friend,
I do not have to ask You
For anything*

—Sri Chinmoy, *27,000 Aspiration-Plants*, #800 📖

This amazing poem can work wonders in multifarious ways. First, I see it as a definition of the word 'supreme', or another word for God. The Supreme, or God, is the Highest form of intelligence. He, She, or It, knows everything because the Supreme is the creator. If He was able to create this miraculous universe in all of its wonders and mysteries that we humans have no idea of how it all came about, then it seems quite clear that the Supreme should easily know our needs and problems, from the most trivial to the most serious.

Reciting this poem one can build the faith necessary to really believe, feel and begin to experience this sometimes misunderstood concept of the Supreme as the highest form of intelligence. Perhaps it is just another way of saying that the Supreme, or God, is omniscient and omnipotent.

Accepting this fact then, one has to admit that since the Supreme is intelligent enough to know all of our needs then He will also be able to fulfill them in due time. We do not have to figure out everything we need in life, but we must invoke the Supreme in various ways, such as through this poem and others, as well as through other spiritual disciplines that we have learned.

Sri Chinmoy was a master of the highest order who knew not only how to invoke this Supreme Being, but also to manifest its light and wisdom. But he also was able to inspire and uplift other human beings who have enough aspiration to want to also invoke the Supreme and to discover the Supreme's sometimes well hidden secrets. But perhaps the best secret which is not really meant to remain secret is that the Supreme is our real friend and He, She or It will fulfill our needs in His own way.

I once saw a bumper sticker that read: "Pray to God, She will help you." Whether we relate to God or the Supreme as masculine, feminine, personal or impersonal, friend, mother or father or even lover, we should try to keep deep in our hearts the faith that we are part and parcel of this highest reality or most intelligent being. This being the case then, we only have to keep our focus on the Supreme high and strong in order to be receptive to Its guidance.

We can ask for things as one usually does in the form of prayers, or better yet we can learn the language of inner silence, or meditation. This is where the answers really come from. Sri Chinmoy says, "When we pray we speak and God listens. When we meditate, God speaks and we listen." In either case we can assume that the answers become clearer to us in Light. Just as the objects in room become clear when light enters the darkness, so also our unseen answers to problems will become clear as we allow more and more of God's light to permeate our consciousness.

Whether we pray for light or try to receive it in silence, as seekers we must learn to love it. Sri Chinmoy writes:

*Each seeker
Should try to become
An exemplary lover
Of God's Light.*

—Sri Chinmoy, *77,000 Service Trees*, #45,417

So in trying to solve the dilemma of friends, it would be an act of true wisdom to discover the truest friend we can. God's light, or our Beloved Supreme, is a way of expressing who this real friend really is. In exercising and building our faith in this most glorious and omnipotent friend, this highest reality of which we are part, we will discover more and more each day the amazing joy of having a true and lasting friend. What more can a person ask for or want?

—Sri Chinmoy, *Friendship*

That's Not All She Wrote

by [Noivedya Juddery](#)

So, in this edition, we're supposed to write anything we like. OK. Not as easy as it sounds. Given free reign, my mind has trouble reining in anything. We've been given some topics I quite liked—*Time*, *Miracles*, *Sacred Space*. We've even had some topics I liked that, for one reason or another, never saw the light of day. We never saw *Women Who Changed the World*, for example.

A pity, as I had an idea for that one. I remembered this the other day, when I spoke to a music professor whose latest book expands on an intriguing theory: that many works by Bach, perhaps the greatest composer in history, were in fact composed by his wife.

I know little about music. Words are my stock in trade. But whatever evidence he has collected, the professor's theory has some exciting possibilities. As with literature, as with everything else, women have



historically been relegated to a lesser status in the musical world. Greatness and genius? That's a man's job, isn't it?

Actually, in literature, perhaps that is not the case—though you'd be forgiven for thinking otherwise. In the centuries before Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters and Emily Dickinson wrote fiction and poetry that could safely be described with that overused term “immortal”, the hall of literary greatness seems to have been a boys' club: Aesop, Homer, Sophocles... even as recently as Shakespeare and Cervantes. Even when the Renaissance provided powerful female rulers, of the calibre of Isabella of Spain and Elizabeth I of England, literature was still mainly the work of men.

But so little is known of Shakespeare. Many scholars remain convinced that the plays attributed to him were actually written by someone else. These scholars believe that, with such masterful use of language, the plays could only be the work of a nobleman—not a commoner like Shakespeare.

Yet an even more intriguing premise is that Shakespeare (the playwright, if not the person) was a woman. Women were not permitted to write plays, so if a woman had such aspirations, why not use the name of a male friend? The idea has stirred up wonder in many scholars, who marvel at Shakespeare's ability—especially in his sonnets—to write from a woman's perspective, a woman's mind. True, his male characters were equally well drawn, but why would such greatness would be limited to one person? Shakespeare was known to use at least six signatures; perhaps he was six people.

Some say (indeed, *insist*) that the true writer must surely have been Elizabeth I. The reigning monarch was a gifted, intelligent and of course, well-educated woman. But though she didn't exactly have a family life, one suspects that she was perhaps too busy building the British Empire to find time to write some of the most brilliant plays in the English language. The theory would seem to be product of the fertile imaginations of those people who, like their ancestors, still look upon royalty with uncritical awe.

Perhaps “Shakespeare” the writer was really his wife, Anne Hathaway. Almost nothing is known about her, except that she probably had a higher education than her husband. Did she help her husband in his work? Did she perhaps *collaborate*? Did she do everything, while he took the credit? All we can do, like thousands of others, is speculate.

Then there was Anne Whateley, uncovered by an English architect as recently as 1939.

The Bard himself (or herself) could not have created such a poignant character. Here was a sweet, virginal nun with hair of gold, afflicted with lameness, who left the convent due to her love for the young writer. However, she was cruelly replaced at the altar, as Shakespeare was committed to Miss Hathaway. Anne Whateley found solace in Italy, giving her a vivid first-hand knowledge of the land, revealed in *Love's Labour's Lost* and *The Merchant of Venice*, that her former sweetheart could never have possessed. Yet she remained smitten by Shakespeare, signing his name to her prodigious literary works.

A fanciful story? Well... probably. One of the few pieces of “evidence” that she even existed was the Bishop of Worcester's Register for a marriage licence to join “Willelmum Shakper et Annam Whateley”. It is dated 27 November 1582, only a day before Shakespeare's bond of marriage to “Anne Hathway of Stratford”. Perhaps “Annam Whateley” and “Anne Hathway” were simply one in the same, and this mysterious woman was simply a

clerical error.

Shakespeare is enigmatic, but Homer is simply unfathomable. If he were a blind poet, as he is usually portrayed, how do we explain the vivid imagery of his work? However, unlike Shakespeare, his reputation rests on only two works: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. He had more than enough time to imagine these two epics, yet they had such different styles—as if written by two different people.

The *Iliad* certainly reads like a boys' story, saluting the glory and heroism of battle. But the *Odyssey*, suggested American scholar Louise Clubb, was a "woman's book". "Penelope is very strong, very much a female heroine," wrote Dr Clubb in her thesis *The Authoress of the Odyssey*. True, she sits at home faithfully while her husband Ulysses takes 20 years (most of them with another woman) to return from the spoils of war, then tolerates it with quiet acceptance as he murders her young suitors. Still, in 20 years of waiting for that appalling "hero" of a husband, she was able to "manage a property, fend a horde of suitors, and raise a son," noted Dr Clubb. "The *Iliad* is a story about what men do. The *Odyssey* is the sort of thing women *think* men do when they go away from home."

This was a cause celebre when it was released, in the heyday of *Ms.* magazine and women's liberation. But Dr Clubb had a point. The tough but surrendered Penelope is not the only strong woman of the *Odyssey*. Whatever their faults, Circe, Minerva, Calypso and Queen Arete are far removed from the subservient women of the *Iliad*.

So could it be that one of the great works that founded Western literature was indeed written by a woman? Of course. And that would be true even if Homer of the *Odyssey* was male. The Athenian statesman Pericles delivered his noted "Funeral Oration" at the conclusion of the Samian war, and he is even credited with its moving words. But they were written by his friend Aspasia of Miletus, one of the most notable women of her time, an influential figure in Athenian politics, a mentor of Socrates, a friend of Sophocles and Euripides. More than just a political speechwriter.

Even the Epistle to the Hebrews, usually credited to Saint Paul, was possibly a woman's work. Though the author's true identity has been lost in antiquity, it might have been Priscilla, church leader in Rome, close confidante of Paul, wife of a Hebrew Christian. To Christian scholars, she seems the most likely candidate, writing to the Hebrews from Rome, as Paul languished in prison, to inspire them to keep the faith.

We will probably never know for certain, but in literary realms, it would seem that women were changing the literary world long before Christine de Pizan was writing her feminist tomes in mediaeval Italy, and even before the tales of Scheherazade, assuming she existed—and assuming she truly did recite *The Arabian Nights*, the greatest of all adventure serials.

All else is left to the imagination. Ponder, if you will, that Aesop, the Greek slave whose wise fables have lasted for so long, was actually a woman. Or that Christopher Marlowe, like a few of the heroines created by his friend Shakespeare, was a woman, hoping to succeed as a playwright in London by disguising herself in male attire. (From what we know, there was no shortage of women doing exactly that in Elizabethan London.)

Like George Elliott or James Tiptree Jr., many years later, the oh-so-masculine names of early writers might well have belonged to women. Or perhaps, rather than pseudonyms, the women were ghostwriters. Men might have fought the battles and (usually) ruled the empires, but the literary world might well have given equal space to both genders.

Cooking the Best Pasta the Real Italian Way

by Priyadarshan Bontempi

Most people think cooking pasta is really easy. Just throw some noodles in boiling water and drain it when it is soft enough, right?

Sorry to say, that is wrong. What is hopefully true is that the secrets I am going to reveal to you will make pasta one of your favourite dishes to prepare and enjoy by yourself or with your dear ones.

First of all, allow me a short digression. To a serious pasta lover the name "noodles" is plain simply dreadful. Noodles is a very good name for Chinese pasta, or Japanese, or Thai, or any other nation's pasta,



but not for Italian pasta. Calling Italian pasta “noodles” would be like calling American baseball or English cricket something like “Stickball”. That is just sad.

Yes, pasta is easy to cook, *if* you have the right ingredients, *if* you know the right way of preparing it, and, above all, *if* you have the right attitude. “What is this?”—I hear some of you gasp—“I now have to be like a zen archer or a samurai warrior just to prepare a bowl of noodles?” Let’s proceed in order, one secret to the next (by the way, didn’t we agree never to call pasta noodles again?)

Pasta Secret #1: Attitude

Let’s start with the most important aspect: attitude.

If you feel that your guest swooning in delight over your steaming pasta is a good thing, you have to take cooking seriously. Cooking, and especially cooking pasta, is an act of love and self-sacrifice. It requires your personal energy, your prana, your inner and outer purity, and your uninterrupted concentration. Without these elements, cooking is not cooking anymore, but just cold, mechanical, heartless food preparation. Would you feed such food to your dog?

Before even start preparing your utensils, stand in your kitchen, facing the stove and get inwardly ready to cook. Silence around and inside you is needed. A short meditation would be even better. Soulfulness is essential.

Feel inside you and visualise in front of your mind’s eye the final pasta dish you want to prepare. Feel the aroma of the pasta, the look, the sound of the moist pasta strands when stirred together, even before they are cradled by the sauce. Imagine the joy on the face of the friends who soon will be enjoying it.

Then, act with determination and precision, but never with haste.

Pasta Secret #2: the Water, the Pot and the Salt

To cook pasta we need only four things: good attitude, good water, good salt and good pasta.

Always use a large and deep pot. Never use a shallow or small pan for boiling pasta. The best ones are those wonderful stainless steel beauties, with a very thick bottom. Puts lots of water to boil. Even if you are going to cook just for yourself a quick “spaghettata”, always use at least 1 quart of water. You need 1 quarter for each 100g of pasta.

If the water from your sink tastes too much of chlorine, you may want to buy a good filtration system for your kitchen. It is worth it!

Regarding the salt, you need 10 grams per each quarter of water in the pot. Always salt the cooking water. If salt must be eliminated for health reasons, then maybe you should stick to rice for the time being. Salt is a must. You need to buy rock sea salt, possibly harvested from the Mediterranean sea.

Pasta Secret #3: Pasta, but Only the Right One

Pasta, of course, must be made only with 100% durum semolina, but that is not enough. The serious pasta lover distinguishes pasta from pasta. Buy only imported Italian pasta, and make sure it is made in Italy (the pasta package could say “Imported from Italy”, but actually made elsewhere). Do not trust huge companies like Barilla that actually make their pasta locally. Their quality is not the same.

Also, do not trust a packaged pasta just because it has an Italian name. Check that the package reads “Made in Italy”. Use the best pasta available. I recommend you look for Italian favourites like De Cecco, or Voiello, that you

can find at your local grocery store or supermarket. De Cecco is probably one of the best pastas you can buy outside Italy. High-quality pasta has a golden color with a vaguely translucent appearance.

Pasta Secret #4: Cooking

Once the water is boiling you need to throw the pasta in the pot.

The most important test for cooking pasta is the cooking time. Usually the cooking time is written by the manufacturer on the pasta box, but you may have to experiment.

Only add the salt when the water is ebullient, and with that I mean boiling with zest.

After adding the salt, wait for the water to start boiling again. The salt will have melted completely in the water. Throw the pasta in the pot, having great care of submerge it completely all at once, at the center of the pot, where the boiling is stronger. Once it is all submerged, stir it as soon as possible with a wooden fork or spoon. Stir pasta as soon as it is dropped into the boiling water and keep stirring every few minutes.

Never add oil, which will coat the pasta and cause it to repel, instead of absorbing, the sauce. Oil would be needed if you are using a low quality pasta, since the cheaper wheat would make it much easier for the strands to get glued together.

Let the pasta cook on a lively flame, stirring it every now and then. Be careful of the cooking time: on Italian packages it is usually correct. Better to stop cooking a few seconds sooner than later, since the pasta will in any case continue cooking for a little while after you drain it.

How do you know the pasta is cooked? Well, if you do not have a cooking time on the pasta package, just sample a strand of the pasta. Break it, and see if the inside is still whitish. That means the pasta is still not cooked. Once the core of the strand has lost its whiteness, that is the time for draining.

Pasta Secret #5: Draining

Never overcook pasta. Only serve pasta "al dente", which literally means "firm to the tooth." Pasta needs to be cooked so as to be still firm when bitten (but only dry pasta should be cooked "al dente" because "fresh" pasta already is soft to begin with.)

Make sure it is as much as possible "al dente" (not soft), because that is the most digestible state. Mushy pasta is not edible anymore, at least for the pasta lover.

Once the pasta is cooked, before draining add a glass of cold water to stop the cooking. Drain the pasta, but make sure you do not drain the pasta too much making it dry. The strands need to be glossy with moisture. Also, you may want to preserve a glassful of the cooking water to add to your sauce. That water will help form a perfect marriage between the pasta and the sauce.

Again, never ever drain your pasta too much. If you use a good pasta brand, you do not need to eliminate any excessive starch, on the contrary, too much rinsing takes away the superb flavour of your pasta. Remember, pasta water is not "dirty water". It is important to keep a little to maintain the strand moist. In this way you also need less sauce.

Pasta Secret #6: the Sauce

I am not going to talk about the infinite variety of sauces you can prepare for your pasta, but make sure you do not "over-sauce" pasta. Use just enough to cover the strands. In any case, the right kind of pasta, when cooked right, is a veritable delight in itself. No sauce is needed to savour such a nourishing food. No matter what, serve the pasta piping hot! Never, ever serve lukewarm or cold pasta.

Pasta Secret #7: Practice!

I did my part. I shared the jealously guarded secrets handed down in the Bontempi family from generation to generation, since the times Rome was a just rustic village on the Mediterranean sea and pasta was still made of *farro* (spelt flour). Now it is really up to you. Let me part by saying: practice, practice, practice! Invite friends over, or treat yourself and your dear ones to some simple, satvic pasta or some zesty one. Remember, a good pasta lover eats pasta at least 5 times a week.

Trading places: if Tejvan were Frodo

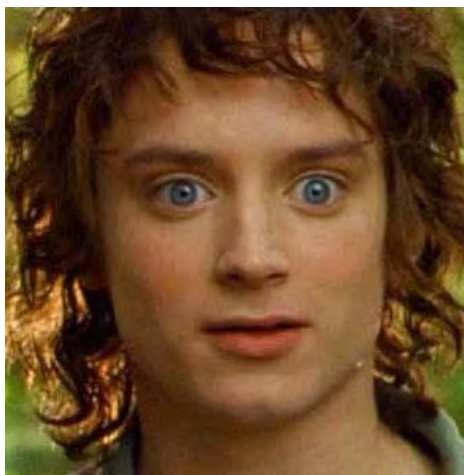
by Mahiruha Klein

Frodo had become the talk of the Shire. Every morning he rose at five o'clock, sharp, and left his cozy little shack at Bag End to run twenty-six miles and then exercised the rest of the day on one of the fifteen stationery bicycles in his living room. Never before had a hobbit exhibited such endurance, determination, grit and sheer athleticism.

One day, while he was riding one of his stationery bikes, he heard a knocking at the door.

"That's surprising," he said to himself, "I'm not expecting any company, and I've had the Sackville-Bagginses sold to a party of itinerant orcs. Who could it possibly be?"

He opened the door only to find the good grey wizard himself, Gandalf.



"If it ain't Mahatma Gandalf!" Frodo cried.

"Gimme five!" he continued, "Up high! Down low—whoa—too slow!"

Gandalf looked at Frodo quizzically.

"Are you trying to cast some kind of spell, young Frodo?" he asked.

"No, sorry—Gandalf—I was just being silly. Come on in!"

Gandalf picked up the small leather satchel he had been toting and renewed his grip on his staff, and stepped through the threshold.

"Frodo, stop, stop. Stop and look at me."

Frodo turned around and looked at the wizard.

"Frodo," Gandalf said solemnly, but with a hint of sadness, "You have lost a prodigious amount of weight. You look pale, as if you were raised on a diet of raw potatoes."

Frodo had Gandalf sit down on the big rocking chair by the door. He himself went over to the curtains to allow some more light into the room. The exercise bicycles shimmered in the morning sun. He didn't answer Gandalf right away.

He took a deep breath, and said, "Well, Gandalf—when I was a child, my parents couldn't even afford to keep a roof over us. We had to sleep outdoors on a pile of leaves by the side of the Great Road. But you know what—we were hap..."

"Cut the nonsense young Baggins—I haven't come to trade jokes with you, but rather to discuss an issue of the gravest importance for the future of Middle Earth."

"Oooh, I'm SOOO eager to hear what the good grey Wizard has to say now. Should I be sitting down for this one?"

"Have you been smoking Lembas wafers like those bad Hobbits at Brandywine prep?" Gandalf roared angrily, spitting a little.

"Well, somet..."

Gandalf cut him off, "Or is it something else, something graver, something more sinister. Tell me, young Frodo—have you been wearing the ring that Bilbo gave you?"

"Ring? What ring?"

Gandalf lowered his head in his hands with a great sigh.

"What ring? What ring? What, O great Iluvatar is this world coming to?"

He raised his head and regarded Frodo for a moment.

"The Ring of Power, Frodo—the one Ring, the Ring upon which the destiny of the world depends upon. THAT Ring."

“Oh, I think I put it in my trophy case, or maybe it’s in the sock drawer. Let me look—big bike race coming up tomorrow you know.”

Gandalf forced a smile, but said “idiot” under his breath.

“Oh, here it is, I strung it on a necklace and hung it from my tie rack! Here, catch grand-pa!”

And with that, the Ring on the cheap gimp chain flew across the room, barely missing Gandalf. It clattered to the ground a few feet from the door in a pile of dust bunnies.

“You threw, you threw the Great Ring of Power—you, you...” it was clear that Gandalf was on the verge of an apoplectic fit so Frodo fetched a glass of ice water and poured it over him.

Gandalf picked the Ring off the ground and headed for the door, dripping wet.

“If you think I would even *consider* in my most foolhardy imaginations, trusting you with this Ring and the great quest associated with it, well, I may as well just ship the Ring to Sauron priority Elvish mail.”

“You’re cross with me, innit?” Frodo said.

But Gandalf had already left, slamming the door behind him. Frodo looked sadly at the puddle of water on the ground, then fished in his pocket for the real Great Ring, enjoying the feeling of weightlessness that always accompanied his instant transparency.

“And they wonder how I always manage to reach the finish line unseen,” he said, and chuckled to himself, a long, hoarse, knowing chuckle.

The Sky is a Storybook

by [Sharani Robbins](#)

I drowsily slid into the driver’s seat of my car for the morning commute to work. Would my thoughts ricochet back to yesterday’s day off of work project or just settle into the long commute as a waking up coffee equivalent?

I knew a book on tape of Tolkien’s short stories could entertain me during the next half hour but declined the notion. As I said, my brain was already brimming with stimuli from the prior day. Rather than listening to a new tale, the memory of the fairies from “Smith of Wooten Major” could beguile me once again if need be.

Driving due east, the morning sun was still low in the winter sky—itsself also only just risen although seemingly less drowsy than me with its bright glare. Sunglasses donned, my attention soon folded into the horizon before me. The clouds in the sky directly ahead formed such a riveting combination of shapes and styles that I felt as if I was driving into the page of a storybook. The book lay open in invitation framed by the trees on each side of the road.

I think there ought to be a special dictionary for clouds because their variety is stunning and scientific labels like cumulous or cirrus hardly paint the picture in words. The closest I could get to the multi-faceted clouds up ahead was to say it was like a comet trail punctuated by sheep jumping over a fence. Add in several other flourishes of white “paint” in the sky and I decided this was definitely God’s abstract art hanging in the sky gallery.

Of course as I drove the horizon ahead changed and the cloud formations shifted slightly. The storybook hue persisted however and I pinched myself to be sure I was driving to work instead of into a fairy tale world.

When I spilled out of the car in the parking lot at work, I marveled at how I had read a story after all during my commute. The sky was a storybook and the clouds were the starring cast. At my feet on the pavement lay a tiny pinecone beckoning like a jewel dropped from Nature’s bountiful storehouse of beauty. I picked it up and looked around to find what tree it played hooky from. Tucked in my pocket, I offered a silent thank you for such an enchanting morning all before my workday had even begun.

Now at work, I exclaim “aha!” The large tall spruce tree directly outside my office window is full of tiny pinecones.



Question answered. And cloud story remembered until the next time God paints and reads aloud on the canvas of the sky.

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