

What it means to be a Doukhobor

By Ernie and Teresa Verigin

Господи благослави! Lord give us your blessing!

Hello. I am Ernie Verigin and this is my wife, Teresa. We have been invited to share our views and understanding of what it means to be a Doukhobor. We are very honored and privileged to have this opportunity. **Спасибо!**

To us, what is most important about being a Doukhobor is spiritual growth and understanding. We will begin by reciting a prayer because we were raised to always ask for God's guidance in everything we do. Ever since we were children, we have learned to recite a variety of Doukhobor psalms. They are prayers to God and they also provide us with spiritual guidance for our daily lives. This was the first psalm we learned to recite as children.

Господи благослави!

Ты Бог мой, я верующий Твой. Ты меня не покинешь,

а я Тебя не забуду, вовек с Тобою жить буду. Богу нашему слава.

This is an English adaptation of this psalm that was prepared by Natasha Jmieff.

Lord give us Your blessing:

Divine One, you are my Source

And my heart's true home.

I know you are always with me, within me.

May I always remember

that you and I are One forever.

Glory to our God.

Спаси Господи! I read this psalm at the start of each new day to remind myself of my everlasting relationship with God - "I am in God, and God is in me". This

basic prayer is our spiritual foundation and takes us back to how the Doukhobors originated in Russia in the early 1600's, some 400 years ago.

Our ancestors were ordinary peasants who were expected to attend the Russian Orthodox Church. The Church taught that God was in heaven and people were separate from God. Therefore, the clergy or Church hierarchy was seen as necessary to serve as a “go between” to connect them to God.

Around this time, there was a spiritual awakening, an “AH HA moment”. People started questioning the belief that God was separate from them, somewhere in heaven. This did not sit well with them. Their inner voice told them that God is everywhere, in heaven and here on earth, AND that the Spirit of God also lives within the souls of ALL people. “We are in God, and God is in us”.

The Church was challenged by this enlightened belief and did everything in its power to try to stop it. But like all good things, this understanding only spread like wildfire and ultimately gave birth to a spiritual movement the Russian Orthodox Church eventually named “Духоборы” or “Духоборцы” in 1785.

The name “Doukhobor” in Russian literally means “Spirit Wrestler”. Our ancestors accepted this name as people who wrestle with and for the Spirit of God, against all injustices in society, and in doing so would only use the spiritual power of Love.

Their new understanding of God and their relationship with God; as well as their commitment to live according to the teachings of Jesus Christ, gave our ancestors a new outlook on how to live. Rather than waiting to be rewarded in heaven, their VISION or PURPOSE became to establish the Kingdom of God here on Earth.

In other words, they would strive to create “heaven on earth”. They would live their lives as if they were in heaven. They pondered what that would look and feel like? How would they interact with others? What were their rights and their responsibilities?

Right from the beginning our ancestors were open to learning about spiritual growth. They didn't say, “This is how it is and this is how it's going to be forever.” They believed that the development of spiritual understanding would continue to evolve over time.

How do we fit into this vision?

It is our understanding that it is necessary for Doukhobors to continue this spiritual journey, by following the path laid out for us by our enlightened ancestors.

The belief that the Spirit of God lives within the souls of ALL people and all Creation continues to be the cornerstone of our spiritual foundation and we both agree that the vision of “creating heaven on earth” continues to be our PURPOSE .

How do we go about “creating heaven on earth”? Where do we start and what guiding principles do we follow to achieve this?

First and foremost one has to have a strong, unwavering belief in something bigger than oneself, a HIGHER POWER, a Source of All Existence (God, Creator, Divine One, Our Father, Great Spirit, LOVE).

We have a saying in Russian, “**Без Бога не до порога!**” which means “**Without God you will get nowhere**”.

Jesus Christ is our spiritual leader and teacher; and some consider Him to be the first Doukhobor. He attained the highest spiritual perfection possible for human beings on this earth, and a true Doukhobor strives to follow His example and His teachings. Living such a life brings about the fullest, happiest life possible here on earth, creating “heaven on earth”.

A Doukhobor lives by the Law of God, known as the Ten Commandments and strives to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ in daily life. Jesus simplified these laws, stating that the highest commandments are to:

- 1) Love God with all your heart, mind, body and soul AND to
- 2) Love your neighbor [all people] as you would yourself.

This is reflected in a Doukhobor psalm that states:

“Where there is Love, there is God. Where there is agreement or unity, there is enlightenment.”

To love God and others requires the action of selfless service to others. It is not about what do I get or what is in it for me? It is about what can I do to help others?

A Doukhobor lives by the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.”

Jesus Christ taught us the Lord’s Prayer, which we consider to be our main prayer. It reminds us of the importance of asking for and practicing forgiveness. A Doukhobor strives to practice forgiveness of oneself and others. This is vital for letting go of grievances which can hold us back from spiritual growth and emotional healing.

If we believe that the Spirit of God lives within the soul of each person, then a Doukhobor should adhere to pacifism and respect not only human but ALL life. We strongly believe that the taking of human and all life for any reason is wrong. One should strive to live in harmony with all of God’s creation.

Doukhobor leader, Peter P. Verigin Чистяков left us his brilliant slogan that highlights this belief:

“The Welfare of the Whole World is not worth the Life of One Child.”

We strongly believe that our body is a living temple or home of the Spirit of God, so we need to respect and look after it the best we can. A Doukhobor should strive to be vegetarian or vegan and avoid harmful substances such as: alcohol, tobacco and narcotics, like Doukhobor leader, Peter Lordly Verigin recommended. One should also have a nutritious diet, exercise and sufficient rest.

Our family is vegetarian. We avoid harmful substances and try to eat a balanced diet consisting of fresh vegetables and fruit that we grow ourselves. BUT... we need to work at getting more exercise and we are definitely lacking in the rest department. It seems that there are just not enough hours in a day to accomplish everything!

We believe that we are spiritual beings or souls experiencing life in a physical body. We are on a personal journey to develop spiritually, but we also require the experience of being part of a collective union of souls or community. None of us have all of the answers, but we learn from each other and together we can ALL develop spiritually.

We strongly believe that the soul does not die with the physical body, but is eternal or lives.... Forever! Therefore; with this understanding, a Doukhobor is dedicated to lifelong spiritual seeking, growth, understanding and development by actively nurturing one's soul.

How do we nurture our soul and receive Divine guidance?

Through our experience we believe that the two are interconnected and that Divine guidance comes during or immediately after nurturing our souls. There are a variety of ways we nurture our souls. Each person is unique with their own preferences. We have found that we are drawn to activities that our souls desire.

We both feel blessed that throughout our lives, we have had the opportunity to experience and actively participate in rich soulful spiritual practices that our ancestors have developed over time. Our prayer meetings and the singing of psalms and hymns have proven to be very stimulating and satisfying to our souls!

There are no words to describe the soul-stirring contentment that our prayer meetings and in particular, psalm singing has revealed. Psalm singing transforms an ordinary setting into an extraordinary spiritually uplifting sacred space. This powerful prayerful atmosphere is created when people come together in sincere prayer and unite in soul communion to collectively praise God.

Singing psalms offers an escape from our daily life. The intricate melodies and singing of drawn out vowels over a prolonged period of time create sound vibrations within us, elevating our frequency, where we ultimately become ONE with our soul and the Spirit of God within.

Other ways of nurturing our souls that we both enjoy include: personal prayer and meditation, spending time with family and friends, gardening, going for walks, hikes and cross-country skiing, being in nature, reading books and articles of a spiritual nature and writing.

Guidance is found within, by listening to your inner voice; your soul. Our Creator designed us this way. Inner guidance comes in the form of a strong feeling, intuition or your inner voice. Sometimes, guidance will appear through people in your life. For instance, you may be thinking of someone you have not seen in a

while, and all of a sudden, you receive a phone call from them, with a message that you needed to hear that very moment.

There are no coincidences in life. Everything unfolds naturally as it should. It is normal to fear or doubt, but if you trust your intuition, your inner voice; you will be confident with your decisions in life.

We respect and appreciate the wisdom and guidance left to us by our Doukhobor leaders. Ever since the Doukhobors have been in Canada; the CCUB and the USCC, have been fortunate to have had the vision and dedication of 5 generations of our leading Verigin family to help guide us along our collective journey.

We also value the spiritual wisdom left to us by our enlightened ancestors through our collective “Living Book” of psalms, hymns and experiences that are passed down from generation to generation.

Nurturing our soul and receiving guidance is also achieved through social interaction. No one person has all the answers. By actively engaging in spiritual discussions with our families, friends and wider community we learn and grow spiritually.

The Doukhobor movement is not considered to be a religion, rather it is best described as a Way of Life or a Way of Being. Believing is not enough. It is important to Put Faith into Action. You cannot have one without the other. Acting on your beliefs goes hand in hand, and is very necessary!

This is why although we are pacifists, we believe it is necessary to stand up for Truth! This is where “Spirit Wrestling” comes into action. We do not passively sit by, but do our best to work for: Peace, Social Justice, Human and Animal rights, and the Environment. Now more than ever, we have to do a better job as a global family at caring for and looking after Mother Earth to ensure future generations the right to clean air, water, soil and energy.

A Doukhobor practices kindness and treats all people as equal; regardless of nationality, race, color, creed, religion, gender, age or sexual orientation. God loves everyone the same! This is why we consider all people to be brothers and sisters!

A Doukhobor is grateful, compassionate, caring and sharing. One lives life with passion, meaning and purpose. God created everyone the same, but made each person unique with something special about them. This is why we need to discover and practice what brings us JOY in life and share our special God-given gift or talent with others! We can appreciate and mutually benefit from “unity in diversity”.

In summary, a Doukhobor lives a spiritual life as reflected in the well-known legacy left to us by Peter Lordly Verigin - “Toil and Peaceful Life”! One lives a simple life and avoids striving for wealth, fame and excessive materialism. This means that one should seek to obtain the basic necessities in life through one’s own labor and in doing so, live peacefully with others.

We strongly believe that there has to be a balance between physical/material needs and spiritual needs. Because we live in a physical world, our physical wants and needs can easily take priority in life and we get distracted by material things. We are all so busy!

People devote most of their time to work - jobs or careers, family life and yes, even growing their own fresh fruit and vegetables! Since we all work hard; we want to have some leisure time to travel, take up hobbies or pursue other pleasures and desires. This may leave us with very little spare time for pursuing spiritual development and growth.

We took time to STOP and individually contemplate this thought...

I am more than my physical body. I am a soul that lives forever. I chose to be a Doukhobor....

We asked ourselves, “Are we living the life our souls truly desire? Is this what our souls are really seeking while we experience life here on earth?”

Consequently, WE have both come to the realization that it is essential to MAKE TIME for our spiritual growth and understanding. It is not always easy, but it is very rewarding and satisfying to our souls!

We don’t have all the answers, but we look forward to learning and discovering more each day! Like our ancestors, WE try to LIVE and cherish each MOMENT;

focusing on the present and trying to do our best each day. This not only helps us stay positive, it helps secure a meaningful past and design a hopeful future!

Teresa and I wish to thank Ahna Berikoff, Sharon Nazaroff and Nathan Wilkinson for their worthy educational endeavor and for inviting us to participate. We believe it is very necessary to continue the discussion of what it means to be a Doukhobor with our children and future generations. We vividly recall what Dr. Mark Mealing replied when he was asked to share his opinion on the future of the Doukhobor movement. He said that as long as Doukhobors continue to discuss what it means to be a Doukhobor, there will always be Doukhobors. We wholeheartedly agree!

We wish to conclude our talk by featuring a painting that our daughter was involved in 2018 with a group of girls from the Sunday Meetings for Children. The children were asked to portray what it means to be a Doukhobor through artwork. This is what the girls collectively came up with.

This is a print of the original painting that was gifted to the late Mrs. Laura P. Verigin, who the children fondly refer to as Бабушка or Баба Ляша. She is the wife of our late Honourary Chairman of the USCC, Mr. John J. Verigin and mother of our current Executive Director, JJ Verigin. Auntie Laura was so wonderful with the children. They all adored her. Auntie Laura passed away in February, 2020. She is deeply missed by everyone.

The painting depicts being at ONE with God, the earth, nature and each other!
When we remember the Oneness of all of God's creation

– we have peace, we have respect and we have LOVE.

Love is the most important!

Remember to be patient, be persistent and persevere! Never give up! Спаси Господи! Прощайте! Farewell. Till we meet again.