

## Traditions of Spiritual Guidance

# Sikh spirituality in daily life

## Living the *gursikhi*

*Joy Barrow*

THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY TWENTY MILLION SIKHS in the world today, of whom about sixteen to seventeen million live in India, mainly in the Punjab. The remainder comprise the Sikh diaspora and live, for example, in Malaysia, Thailand, Canada, USA, Fiji, Kenya and Australia – as well as in European countries such as France, Germany and, of course, Britain. Today there are approximately half a million Sikhs in Britain, the west London area comprising the largest community.

The first of the Sikh gurus, Guru Nanak, said, ‘If you want to play the game of love, come with your head on your palm to the Guru’. This meant that anyone who wished to be his disciple – or *sikh* – should be prepared to offer their lives to God. This article will examine the main religious practices of Sikhs, or the *gursikhi*.<sup>1</sup> In order to provide a theological basis for Sikh practices, I will consider the teachings of the ten gurus, and in particular that of Guru Nanak.

### *The concept of God*

Sikhism is a monotheistic religion. The *Mul Mantra*, the first verse of the morning prayer, the *Japji Sahib*, states:

This Being is One. The Truth. Immanent in all things. Sustainer of all things. Creator of all things. Immanent in creation. Without fear and without enmity. Not subject to time. Beyond birth and death. Self-manifesting. Known by the Guru’s grace.

The Oneness of God also finds expression in the belief in the oneness of humanity. All people are equal regardless of their birth or gender. In Sikhism the use of the male pronoun for God, while sometimes used as a literary convenience, is inaccurate. This is not a matter of academic pedantry; to ascribe one gender to God would be to impose a limitation. For example, the Sikh holy book, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, states: ‘You

(God) are my father, You are my mother, You are my kinsman, You are my brother'.<sup>2</sup>

### *The teachings of Guru Nanak*

Sikhism traces its origins to the divinely inspired words, or *gurbani*, of Guru Nanak (1469–1539). The word *guru* is often translated as 'teacher', but this is inadequate. The explanation Sikhs themselves give is that it comes from two Punjabi words: *gu* meaning darkness and *ru* meaning 'light'. A *guru* is therefore someone who delivers a person from the darkness of misunderstanding and ignorance to spiritual enlightenment. Consequently, the word may refer to God (who has a variety of names including *Vahiguru* and *Satguru*), the ten human *gurus* of the Sikh tradition, or the *Guru Granth Sahib*.<sup>3</sup>

Sikhs believe that Guru Nanak was called into God's presence at the age of thirty years and told to 'go into the world to pray and teach humanity how to pray'. For the next thirty years he travelled extensively, teaching people by both his actions and words to meditate on God's name (*nam simran*); to earn a living through honest work, giving a proportion of what they earn to those in need (*dan*); to practise cleanliness, which is the necessity to keep clean and tidy for reasons of hygiene and not ritual washing (*isnan*); and to serve both God and humanity as a whole, not just other Sikhs (*seva*). The basis of Sikh daily practice, or *gursikhi*, remains *nam*, *dan*, *isnan* and *seva*.

For Guru Nanak, it is only by practising meditation on the name that liberation from the cycle of birth–life–death–rebirth can be achieved. However, there are different levels of meditation. McLeod has described three states.<sup>4</sup> At the first stage the person repeats a word; for example the word *Vahiguru* or a daily prayer, but does so with little thought for what is being said.<sup>5</sup> At the second stage the person takes part in the *diwan*, or worship, ceremony in the *gurdwara*, singing or listening to *kirtan*, or religious songs.<sup>6</sup> At the third stage, the word for God is interiorized. This is a personal spiritual development, beyond explanation and description, which can only be experienced, and is achieved through a deep contemplation of God's mystery.

For about thirty years, Guru Nanak travelled around India and the surrounding countries, accompanied by a Muslim friend, Mardana.<sup>7</sup> Mardana played the rebeck, a stringed instrument rather like a mandolin. Whenever Guru Nanak spoke the *gurbani*, Mardana composed a tune to fit them. A well-known *sakhi*, or story, illustrates both the divine origin of the words Guru Nanak uttered and the importance of

Mardana's tune. It relates to an incident which took place at the siege of Saidpur. Mardana had been entrusted with the care of a Mughal army officer's horse. Suddenly Guru Nanak felt inspired to utter the *gurbani*. When he told Mardana to take up his rebeck, Mardana protested that the horse might run away. Guru Nanak told him to let go of the horse! The tunes that Mardana composed are the origin of the musical tradition of *kirtan* which is an integral part of all Sikh services.<sup>8</sup>

Wherever Guru Nanak went *dharamsalas* were established. A *dharamsala* was 'a room or building used for worship, congregational assembly, discourse (*katha*), the singing of devotional songs (*kirtan*), or any other religious purpose' and was the precursor of the *gurdwara*.<sup>9</sup> In about 1520 Guru Nanak settled in the village of Kartarpur, and a large group of disciples gathered around him. There he established a community which had two characteristics. First, everyone lived a family life and, second, the focus of the community was the *gurbani*. The daily pattern of life at Kartarpur is substantially the same as that practised by devout Sikhs today. Between 3.00 a.m. and 6.00 a.m. they would repeat the prayers, *Japji Sahib* and *Asa di Var*. This was followed by a reading from, and teaching based on, the *gurbani*, then the singing of *kirtan* and the saying of the prayer *arati*. After breakfast, all members of the community, including Guru Nanak, undertook manual work. In the evening the community met together for *kirtan* and the recitation of the prayer *sodar reharis*. After a communal meal, *kirtan* again took place. Before retiring for the night, the late evening prayer *sohilla* was said.

Today Sikhs rise before dawn and, after washing, say their morning prayers. After going to work Sikhs will say the *sodar reharis* and, before retiring for the night, the *sohilla*. Some of my Sikh friends will also attend a *nam simran* daily in their *gurdwara* (see note 5). Other Sikhs may visit the *gurdwara* on the way to work, staying for a few minutes. Many will attend *kirtan* in the *gurdwara* during some part of the evening.

Guru Nanak was succeeded in turn by nine further gurus. Succession was based on a person's spiritual qualities, not on hereditary grounds. The fifth guru, Guru Arjan, supervised the collection of the *gurbani* of Guru Nanak and his successors, and those of some Hindu and Muslim holy men whose teachings were similar to those of Guru Nanak.<sup>10</sup> In August 1604 this collection, known as the *Adi Granth*, was installed in the newly completed *Harmandir Sahib* (now sometimes referred to as the Golden Temple) in Amritsar. At the installation Guru Arjan made prostration to the *Adi Granth*, thereby showing that the *gurbani* was

more important that he was, for it was God's Word while he was only a messenger of God.

The tenth guru, Guru Gobind, added the *gurbani* of his father, the ninth guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, to the *Adi Granth*. Shortly before he died, Guru Gobind stated that there would be no more human gurus but that the *Adi Granth* would be his successor. Consequently it became known as the *Guru Granth Sahib*.<sup>11</sup> Sikhs believe that the *Guru Granth Sahib* is the living presence of God among God's people. It is treated with great respect, but never worshipped.

### *The place of worship, the gurdwara*

The Sikh place of worship is called the gurdwara. This is a combination of two Punjabi words: *guru* and *duara*. The word *duara* means gateway. Thus gurdwara means 'the gateway to the Guru'. A gurdwara is therefore any place where the *Guru Granth Sahib* is installed and may be purpose-built, a room in a person's home, or a tent in a garden.

The word 'installed' is a technical term to describe how the *Guru Granth Sahib* must be treated. Inside the gurdwara, the *Guru Granth Sahib* is in a central position at the front, and placed on a *takht*, or raised platform. The *granthi*, or reader, will sit behind the *Guru Granth Sahib*.<sup>12</sup> To raise the level of the scriptures above that at which the *granthi* is sitting, the *Guru Granth Sahib* will be placed on a low table covered in richly embroidered cloths. A canopy will be erected above it as a symbol of honour and respect. A *chowri* will be waved over the *Guru Granth Sahib*. This is a fan with a wooden or silver handle with hair from the yak, or mountain goat. This is a symbol of the authority of the *Guru Granth Sahib*.<sup>13</sup> By the side of the *takht* there is a low platform for musicians, who will accompany the *kirtan*.

Gurdwara services may last anything from a couple of hours to several hours. But people come and go throughout; there is no concept of arriving at the beginning and staying until the end. At a gurdwara in Southall *kirtan* takes place from 5.30 a.m. until at least 10.00 p.m., and sometimes all-night *kirtans*, called *rainasabai*, are held. There is no special holy day in Sikhism; the day chosen depends on the country in which the Sikhs are living. Consequently, in Britain Sikhs will make a special effort to attend the gurdwara on a Sunday. Sunday is also the chosen day in India, but that probably owes more to the influence of the British *Raj* than any overtly religious reason.

Upon entering a gurdwara, worshippers will take off their shoes and cover their heads, unless they are wearing a turban. They will then walk

up to the *Guru Granth Sahib*, make prostration, and give a gift, usually of money. It must be stressed that this is not an act of worship, but is a sign of respect for the *Guru Granth Sahib* as the living presence of God among God's people. For the same reason, worshippers sit cross-legged on the floor, as the *Guru Granth Sahib* must be at a higher level than any person. It is also a symbol of the equality of humanity; every person sits at the same level.<sup>14</sup>

*Diwan* consists of *kirtan* with several *katha*, or talks, based on the *Guru Granth Sahib*. The word *kirtan* comes from the word *kirat*, which means praise. In the *Guru Granth Sahib* it states:

The truthful Lord, Eternal name. The way to communicate is intense love . . . Sing, listen to God's praises with inner love.<sup>15</sup>

There are three levels of *kirtan*. At its initial level *kirtan* is described as *kan-rasa*, which literally means 'pleasure of the ears'. This is when the *kirtan* cleanses the mind of its spiritual darkness and lower passions:

Whoever chants or listens to *kirtan*, their dark thoughts vanish. All wishes are fulfilled and hope is strengthened.<sup>16</sup>

The second stage is when the mind becomes increasingly attuned to the *kirtan*. When a person frequently experiences *kirtan* in this way it brings about a state of *sahaj*, or divine bliss.

When the consciousness awakens to the melody of the *shabad* (word) within, the mind in the body is detached from worldly pleasures, the mind is attuned to the True Name. Devotion to God brings bliss through the Guru's *shabad*; the Name tastes sweet and one is absorbed in it.<sup>17</sup>

The third, and highest, level of *kirtan* is called *surat-shabad-da-mel*, which means the union of the consciousness with God.

Then the blissful strain creates unstruck music. And through the spiritual experience of *shabad* (God's word), one realises the Pure Lord.<sup>18</sup>

At the end of *diwan* a pattern of events takes place. First, the congregation will stand and place their hands together at chest height while a congregational prayer called *Ardas*, which means petition, is said. This

is followed by a *hukamnama*, which is a random reading from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, that is believed to be God's message to the congregation.<sup>19</sup> These are particularly sacred moments, and it is disrespectful to enter or leave at this time. The service concludes with the eating of *karah parshad*. The ingredients are equal parts of semolina, butter and milk. However, Sikhs often say that the extra ingredient is the *gurbani* as it has been prepared within the sound of the presence of *kirtan*. *Karah parshad* will be given to all members of the congregation in their cupped hand as a symbol of the Sikh belief in the equality of humanity.

### *The concept of seva – serving all humanity*

*Seva* comes from the Sanskrit root *sev*, which means 'to serve, wait, attend upon, honour or worship'. Although *seva* is usually translated as 'service', this is incomplete as it means both giving honour or worship to God, and serving all humanity. The latter meaning finds particular expression in the *langar*, the communal meal that is served at the gurdwara. The *langar* is often called the laboratory of *seva*. This is because it provides many opportunities for *seva* by, for example, preparing and serving the food in the *langar*, or washing up the dirty dishes.

*Langar* is also an expression of the Sikh belief in the equality of humanity. Sikhs frequently emphasize the importance of the *langar* by telling a story about the Mughal Emperor Akbar. One day he visited the third guru, Guru Amardas. As the Emperor, Akbar expected immediately to be shown into the guru's presence. However, he was commanded to sit on the ground with the other visitors and share a meal, for the rule of Guru Amardas was 'first eat together, then meet together'.

*Langar* can also provide for the material needs of Sikhs and non-Sikhs. I am aware of several non-Sikhs who regularly have *langar* as their main meal of the day. They know that they can come to the *langar* whenever they wish and be given a meal free of charge. On one occasion when I was talking to some Sikhs, one of them was called away. He later returned, explaining that a man had come to the door of the gurdwara but had not entered as he had been drinking alcohol and had a can of lager.<sup>20</sup> However, he was hungry and wanted a meal. My Sikh friend therefore went to the *langar*, obtained a tray of food, and took it to the man who was waiting outside.

However, *seva* is not restricted to the *langar*, but may also involve looking after worshippers' shoes, or reading the *Guru Granth Sahib*; all are equally acts of *seva* and none is more important than another. *Seva*

may, however, be practised by participating in sponsored events or collecting money for charity. Two things must be stressed. First, it is the duty of all Sikhs to do *seva* and, second, *seva* is for the benefit of all humanity, not just other Sikhs. An example of this is Khalsa Aid, which a group of Sikh young people from Slough and Southall founded in 1999 to mark the 300th anniversary of the *Khalsa*. This is a humanitarian relief organization which provides care for people regardless of their religion or country of birth. They have already taken relief supplies to Kosovo, and Turkey after the recent earthquake. When doing so, they use their holiday allowance from their paid employment.

### *The Khalsa – the Sikh community*

Khalsa Aid was named after the Khalsa which the tenth Guru, Guru Gobind Singh, founded at the festival of Vaisakhi in 1699.<sup>21</sup> Guru Gobind Singh stated that members of the Khalsa should live according to a *Rahit*, or religious and moral code.<sup>22</sup> He also instructed them to wear religious symbols known as the five 'Ks'. This is because K is the first letter of each term in Punjabi: *kesh* (uncut hair), *kara* (steel wrist band), *kangha* (comb), *kirpan* (sword) and *kachhahira* (loose shorts). Each of these items has deep spiritual meaning. When the Offensive Weapons Act was passed in Britain, the wearing of the *kirpan* by Sikhs was specifically excluded from the prohibitions. Although the wearing of the *kirpan* by schoolchildren may sometimes raise initial questions, it has proved perfectly possible to overcome concerns on the part of school and education authorities.

Although the turban is not regarded by most Sikhs as one of the five Ks, it has a deep meaning for Sikhs, and lengths of cloth for turbans are frequently exchanged as an act of respect, for example at marriage or when the head of the a family has died.<sup>23</sup> In 1976 Sikhs obtained the right to wear the turban in place of a crash helmet when riding a motor bike. In 1984, in a ground-breaking ruling in the case of *Mandla v Dowell*, the House of Lords ruled that Sikhs constituted an ethnic group.<sup>24</sup> This means that Sikhs are covered by race relations legislation. Nevertheless, there is the perception among many of my Sikh friends that there exists in business and commerce a 'glass ceiling' for Sikhs who wear a turban. While they may gain promotion to lower management positions, they never achieve further promotion. Furthermore, I have been told by Sikh boys that they are teased by other pupils at school for wearing a turban.

### ***Respect for all religions***

Sikhs have a deep respect for all religions. When Cardinal Hume passed away, the *Ramgarhia* gurdwara in Southall, west London, sponsored a memorial service for him on the day of his funeral. Non-Sikhs may be invited to speak in gurdwaras, as this writer has done. The *Guru Granth Sahib* contains not only the hymns of some of the Sikh gurus, but also the *bhagat bani* or the writings of non-Sikhs whose teachings were similar to those of the gurus. Their inclusion is an illustration of Sikh belief that God's revelation is not only confined to the gurus.

Sikhs also tell the story of their sixth guru, whose victorious return to Amritsar is remembered at the festival of Divali each year. Guru Hargobind had been unjustly imprisoned in the Gwalior Fort during the reign of the Mughal Emperor Jehangir. However, when he was offered his freedom he refused to leave until fifty-two Hindu princes who had also been unjustly imprisoned were freed. The Mughal authorities agreed that as many princes as could hold on to the guru's cloak would be released. With great wisdom, Guru Hargobind ordered a cloak with fifty-two tassles to be made. Taking a tassel each, all the princes walked to freedom.

### ***Concluding with spiritual practice***

An appropriate conclusion to an article on Sikh spirituality is to consider the daily life of a group of devout young people aged from twenty to thirty-five years old whom this writer knows well. They are members of a new generation of devout young people who are returning to their spiritual roots, some of whom have helped their parents to do so as well. Many of them do not come from religious families.

Most of this group of young people rise before dawn and attend a one-hour continuous recitation of the *gurbantra*, from 4.00 a.m. until 5.00 a.m. daily at a local gurdwara. However, others who live in a nearby town attend a similar service which takes place from 5.30 a.m. until 6.30 a.m. daily in their local gurdwara. After this service, they return home and say the five *bani* – the five set morning prayers – before leaving home for university or paid employment. For the rest of the day, they practise *nam simran* as they pursue their daily activities. One of them stated that her love for God was such that she automatically found herself doing *nam simran* as she drove her car. 'What happens, when I'm driving, is I find I do more *nam simran*; not consciously, I find it just happens and I end up singing, and I enjoy that.'



she explained. Another young man explained how he did *nam simran* during his one-hour journey to university. He said that he used ear plugs to listen to *kirtan* on his pocket cassette so as not to disturb the other passengers. In the evening, the young people say the evening prayer *sodar reharis*, and the prayer *sohilla* before retiring for the night, which is usually about 9.00 p.m. to enable them to rise before dawn.

On a Sunday, they also attend *diwan* in the gurdwara at midday, and then a *sikhi* workshop in the afternoon. The latter comprises a two-hour study of a passage from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, each member taking their turn to read and translate part of the passage. This is followed by a discussion of its meaning and how its teaching can be applied in daily life. Members of the workshop are also undertaking a *sahaj* path, or a broken reading of the *Guru Granth Sahib* from beginning to end. The workshop therefore concludes with a one-hour reading, commencing at the place where it ceased the previous week.

These young people are also active in performing *seva*, especially by participating in *kirtan* programmes, both in the UK and abroad. In the last two years members of the *sikhi* workshop have participated in *kirtan* programmes in Toronto, New York, Paris and Pakistan. They also attend, and sometimes participate in, all-night *kirtan* programmes which take place once a month in various towns and cities in England. For them, and many other Sikhs, living the *gursikhi* is not something that is restricted to one day a week, or when they are in the gurdwara, but affects every moment of every day.

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#### NOTES

1 There is no dichotomy between the explicitly religious and moral behaviour; all aspects of life should be *gursikhi*, i.e. in accordance with the teachings of the Guru.

2 AG 103. AG stands for *Adi Granth*, the name given to the Sikh scriptures when first compiled under the supervision of Guru Arjan. Unlike the Bible which is divided into chapters and verses,

references to passages in the *Guru Granth Sahib* relate to the page number on which the passage is found. Therefore AG 1010 indicates that the quotation is found on page 1010.

3 This multiple use by Sikhs of the word *guru* can sometimes cause misunderstanding. For example, some children will talk of one of the human gurus as their 'God'. By this they do not mean that he is divine, but that he is a person whom God chose to speak the *gurbani*; it is the words that are uttered that are divine, not the person.

4 W. H. McLeod (ed and trans), *Textual studies for the sources of Sikhism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1990), p 40.

5 However, some of my Sikh friends will arise at 3.30 a.m. and attend *nam simran* at a local gurdwara, which is a continuous and thoughtful recitation of the word *Vahiguru* which takes place daily between 4.00 a.m. and 5.00 a.m.

6 *Diwan* literally means 'court'; for example, the court of a ruler. Within Sikhism, its meaning is a religious service held in the presence of God. The *darbar diwan* is the name given to the room in the gurdwara where the worship takes place.

7 The fact that the Hindu-born Guru Nanak was accompanied by the Muslim Mardana at a time when India was occupied by the Mughal Empire, and with it was persecuting Hindus, is a reflection of Sikh belief in respect for all religions.

8 This means that *kirtan* had its origins in musical compositions by a Muslim. See also the last section of this article.

9 W. H. McLeod (trans), *B40 Janam Sakhi* (Amritsar: Guru Nanak Dev University, 1980), p 82; footnote 342.

10 The *Guru Granth Sahib* is the only holy book which contains the writings of members of other religions, and is a reflection of the Sikh respect for all faiths.

11 While the *Guru Granth Sahib* was to provide guidance in spiritual matters, the Khalsa was to provide guidance in secular matters.

12 Sometimes a *granthi* is described as a priest. It cannot be stressed too strongly that there is no institutionalized priesthood in Sikhism. In India a *granthi* qualification is one of many academic qualifications a person may obtain. It is for reasons of convenience that a gurdwara may have one or more *granthis* to read the *Guru Granth Sahib* and to assist in its educational activities. Any person, man or woman, regardless of age, may read the *Guru Granth Sahib* in the gurdwara if they have the necessary knowledge to do so.

13 The *chowri* should never be described as a 'flywhisk', even though some books inaccurately do so.

14 Regardless of a person's worldly status, they must not be given preferential treatment. Prince Charles, for instance, when he has visited gurdwaras, has also sat cross-legged on the floor. If people are disabled, I have seen them discreetly sitting on a chair at the back of the hall. I have also seen a wheelchair-bound Sikh being wheeled to the *takht* where he put his hands together and bowed his head in respect. He was then taken to the back of the hall. However, I have also seen very elderly Sikhs who could barely walk struggling to make prostration to the *Guru Granth Sahib*. After being helped to their feet, they sat on the floor together with the rest of the congregation.

15 AG 1.

16 AG 683.

17 AG 907.

18 AG 1042. See also Gobind Singh Mansukhani, 'The unstruck melody: musical mysticism in the Scriptures' in Kerry Brown (ed), *Sikh art and literature* (London: Routledge), pp 117-128.

19 The first *hukamnama* of the day, which is given when the *Guru Granth Sahib* is brought into the *diwan* hall at dawn, is written on a board in a prominent place in the gurdwara. Many Sikhs who visit the gurdwara during the day will stop at the board and meditate on the words of the *hukamnama*.

20 The *Rahit Maryada* states that 'anyone, irrespective of caste or creed, may enter a gurdwara, provided they do not carry tobacco or anything else specifically forbidden by the Sikh religion'.

21 See the article, 'Millennium for a Sikh', by Charanjit Ajit Singh, *The Way* (October 1999), p 364.

22 The contents of the *Rahit* has developed since 1699. However, the *Rahit Maryada* agreed by the SGPC (Shiromani Gurdwara Parbandhak Gurdwara Committee – based in Amritsar) is the standard *Rahit* which is followed today.

23 However some Sikhs, who are associated with the Akhand Kirtani Jatha, believe that the turban and not *kesh* is one of the five Ks. Among these Sikhs both men and women wear turbans.

24 This case was regarding the refusal of a private school to admit a Sikh boy unless he wore the school cap. This would have meant him cutting his hair.