

Some Thoughts on Guru Teachings

Many thinkers, all over the world, through the ages, have devoted lifetimes to understand the purpose of life. One may recall here the thoughts expressed by an American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882) who wrote a poem, entitled, "A Psalm of Life," in 1839. He was my favorite Poet when I was a High School student at the Khalsa High School at Sialkot (now in Pakistan), more than six decades ago. I quote selectively from the poem. "Tell me not, in mournful numbers, "Life is but an empty dream!" For the soul is dead that slumbers, and things are not what they seem. Life is real! Life is earnest! And grave is not its goal; Dust thou art, to dust returnest, was not spoken of the soul...."

Art is long, and Time is fleeting, and our hearts, though stout and brave, still, like muffled drums are beating funeral marches to the grave....

Lives of great men all remind us, we can make our lives sublime. And departing leave behind us footprints on the sands of time....

Let us, then, be up and doing, with heart for any fate; still achieving, still pursuing, learn to labor and to wait...."

Strangely enough these thoughts echo the teachings of Guru Nanak who preached a hopeful message to the world at large. He encouraged humans to set the goal of promoting themselves to an elevated spiritual plane either through self-effort or through mentorship by the Guru; age is no barrier to embark on this journey. One may examine the lives of Sikh Gurus to seek guidance on this topic. We note that Guru Nanak was self-inspired when he was in twenties. Lehna came to Guru Nanak for mentorship when he was in thirties. Amar Das turned to Guru Angad for guidance when he was in sixties. Jetha sought out Guru Amar Das in pre-teen years. These examples cover a wide spectrum in time when humans deeply felt a need to improve their spiritual lives. Tenth Sikh Guru Gobind Singh bequeathed Guruship to Adi Granth; it is a verbal testimony of the Gurus, now known as Shri Guru Granth Sahib (SGGS). The Sikhs are advised to consult SGGS for wisdom and guidance on a daily basis.

Some teachings may be recounted briefly. Guru Nanak taught that humans should always remember the Creator (idol worship is forbidden), lead normal lives (asceticism is forbidden), raise families, earn livelihood through honest means, and share their largesse with less fortunate ones, irrespective of caste, creed or color. Sanctity of life, compassion, humility, and equality of gender is stressed (Sikh women may serve as priests). Selfless service of humans has a high merit in Sikh faith. To uphold human rights, protect the weak and the oppressed (by arms if necessary) is a part of Sikh credo. SGGS is written for the large part in the language spoken by the people in Punjab, namely Gurmukhi. At the time of Guru Nanak the language did not have a script (like Navajo language today). Second Sikh Guru Angad developed a script for the spoken language; it came to be known a Gurmukhi (from the mouth of Guru). Fifth Sikh Guru Arjan Dev used Gurmukhi script to write Adi Granth. Nanak introduced the concept of group worship devoid of priests. This prevented the rise of a distinct priestly class in Sikh Faith. This is a great blessing for the Sikh community, considering excesses of priests in Hindu, Muslim and Christian communities. Let us take the case of Hindu priests, the Brahmins. Manu's doctrine put Brahmins at the top of Hindu castes. Brahmins conducted religious rites in Sanskrit language that common folks could not understand. Brahmins exploited their exalted societal status to prey on the lower castes, particularly the Shudras; they were assigned to the most menial tasks, denied education, and the right to worship at temples. Shudras could not drink water at the same well used by higher castes. It was believed that Shudras could pollute the higher castes by merely casting their shadow on them. One reads about the inferior status of women in Hindu society. They were

supposed to depend on their parents in childhood, on husbands in youth, and sons in old age. Widows were encouraged by greedy relatives to consent to burn themselves alive on the funeral pyres of husbands; the rite is known as SATEE. An opinion existed that women could not attain salvation nor enter heaven until they had been reborn as men. Women were considered to be sensual, natural tempters and spoilers of the spiritual lives of men. If one looks closely, similar abuses exist in Islamic, Christian, and Jewish societies. However, our focus is on the conditions in India when Nanak appeared on the scene over six centuries ago. Nanak defined, 'One, Absolute, Eternal, Omnipresent God, Lord of hundreds of gods and goddesses, Creator of all, devoid of fear and enmity, Timeless, Unborn, Himself His Own Being.' He preached that living things are created by God; anyone who gives them pain or sorrow offends God. He refuted the theory of original SIN and the doctrine of KARMA that humans are condemned to go through repeated births for something their ancestors did in the past. Nanak's wisdom was carried forth undiluted by nine succeeding Gurus over a period of two hundred and fifty years until Guruship passed on to SGGS. The teachings of Guru Nanak constitute the Gold Standard for Sikhs.

At this point one may ask how can teachings formulated centuries ago be relevant to problems facing the contemporary, highly technological world of today. The answer is to be found in the human nature; it has not changed over millennia. I learned a long time ago that parents are unable to pass on the lessons, learned by them in a lifetime, to their progeny. Each generation must experience life starting from square one and draw its own inferences based on what life experiences teach them. This being the case, it becomes important to shape one's outlook based on time-tested values to ensure that one leads a happy and contented life. In the past centuries, when secular education was not so widely available, one's outlook was greatly influenced by the company one kept; wisdom was to be obtained at the hands of a select few. The company of the Guru was indispensable then. When I was a teenager I was convinced that universal education was the answer to ills that plague the society. My hope was that if men and women were exposed to liberal education they would learn to evaluate difficult situations in an objective manner and seek a solution to a difficult problem that is fair to all concerned. As I advanced in years, I discovered (to my great dismay) that educated folks do not necessarily handle a challenging situation objectively. Instead they are very clever at concealing prejudices by presenting self-serving arguments in support of a 'solution' patently unfair to one of the aggrieved parties. It took Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to convince a nation of educated folks that age old, deep-seated prejudices against the colored folks is not rational and morally quite wrong. The change in societal thinking to appreciate this stark injustice took its own time to take hold; vestiges of the old thinking still plague the society. Dr. King drew inspiration from the teachings of a self-inspired carpenter (recorded in the English version of Bible) who lived nearly two millennia ago!

Sikhs are a progressive people (they pray for the welfare of everyone). Their influence on the social and political life of India is out of proportion to their numbers. They are concentrated in the State of Panjab in North India, considered to be the breadbasket of the country; nearly 30% of food consumed in the country is produced in Panjab. Not surprisingly, Panjab is the richest State in India in terms of income per person. Sikhs are represented in the professions in India and in every country in the world. They are very visible in England and the Western parts of Canada and USA. They are good citizens; the first Asian Representative in US Congress was a Sikh Daleep Singh Saund; he came from California. Similarly, a Sikh was the first Asian Premier of the Province of British Columbia in Canada.

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