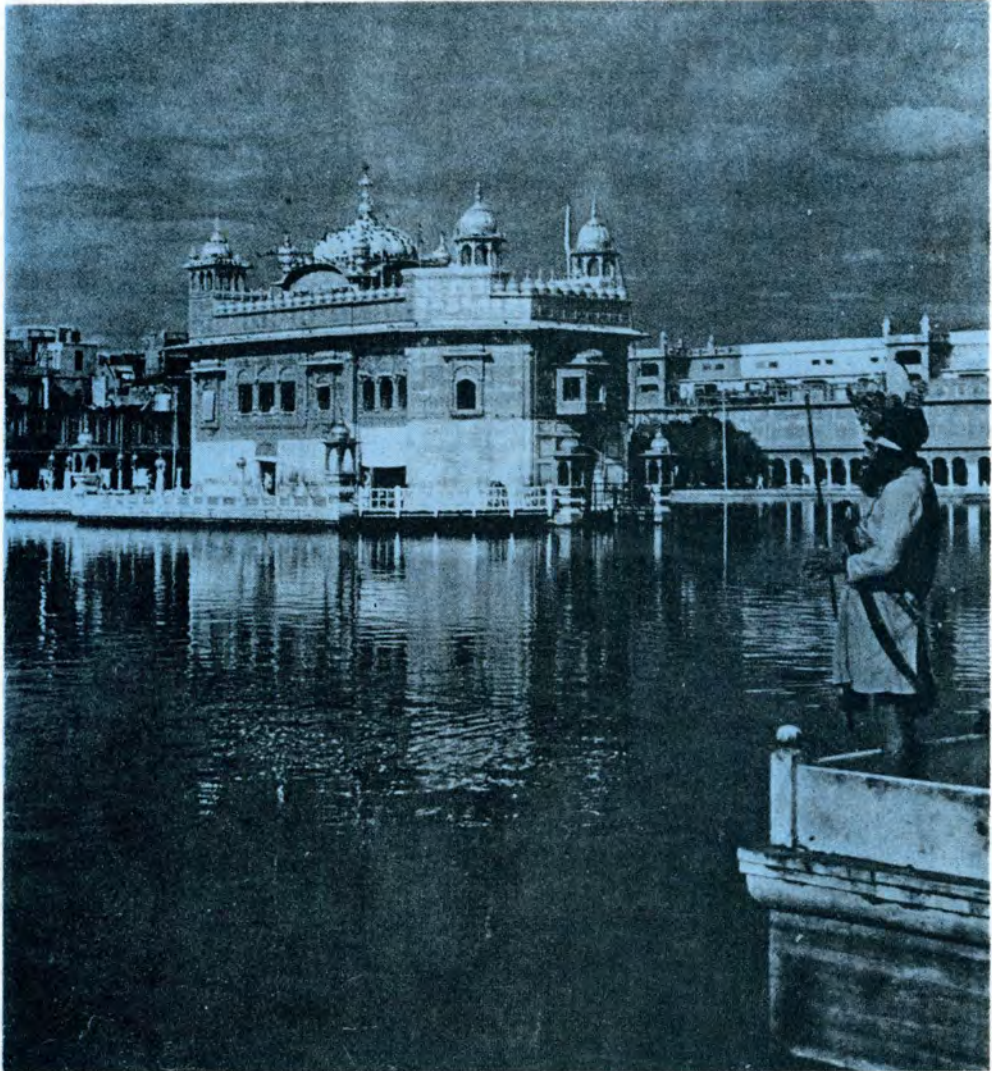


AVTAR

AN INTRODUCTION TO SIKH BELIEF

By
Mrs. P. M. WYLAM



GOLDEN TEMPLE AMRITSAR

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INTRODUCTION

When Guru Nanak first began to preach his message, it was not with the intention of starting a new religion. He was such a gentle person, full of selflessness and humility that it was not in his nature to arrogate to himself the position of a leader. He never stopped to think or calculate about the impact on the world which his teaching would make. He was, as he often asserted himself, a humble servant of God and he was only concerned with doing God's will in the world ; with suggesting practical ways of countering the evil, ignorance and superstition which had laid hold of the common people. Guru Nanak, was in fact, primarily concerned with the spiritual welfare of the common people. He understood well enough the complicated beliefs, religions and philosophies currently held by the Brahmins, various holy men and Muslim quazis, and he could converse and argue with these on equal terms. However, religion, he believed, should be equally accessible to the ordinary man, the simple potter, the peasant, the shopkeeper or even the lowest outcasts. Therefore, Guru Nanak taught only one simple belief, and only one simple religious practise which, once imbibed into the heart of a sincere devotee, could save him from all evil and temptation. The belief was in the One-ness of God, the Creator, and the practise was in the constant remembrance of His Name, with the ultimate aim of achieving salvation.

THE ONE-NESS OF GOD

Like the people of ancient times, the common people of Guru Nanak's day paid tribute to a large number of minor gods and goddesses which were then known to Hinduism. They were attached to these in superstitious bondage and fear evolved over the centuries, and which had no relation at all to religion as such. Instead of deriving comfort, therefore, such adherents suffered more from fear and worry. Superstitious ceremonies were encouraged by Brahmin priests and astrologers who made handsome profits out of the gullibility of the people. It was to exterminate these practises and to counteract these evil influences that Guru Nanak emphasised strict monotheism in his teachings. He, therefore, composed the *Mool Mantra* and taught it to all his followers :

“ There is one God
His Name is Truth,
The All-pervading Creator,
Without fear, without hatred
Immortal, unborn, self-existent,
By grace, the Enlightener.
True in the beginning, true throughout the ages,
True even now, Nanak, and forever shall be true.

(*Japji, Mool Mantra*)

His devoted follower, Lehna, who was destined to become the second Guru, took this verse seriously to heart. Lehna, on becoming Guru Angad, propagated this thesis, and said that it was intended to be learned and understood and repeated by all Sikhs in order to remind them of God's One-ness and of His other most important attributes.

God is Everything to the Sikh : His attributes are endless and all goodness, mercy and love are contained in Him. He has created all things and remains enshrined within them as both mind and matter ; He is immanent. He is also transcendent ; for He can and does exist without creation, above and beyond everything. He is All-powerful ; nothing exists or happens without His knowledge or without His permission ; He sees into all things and directs even the smallest affairs of His creatures. God is the Divine Father who cares for His children, bestows upon them all the manifold blessings of this world and listens to their prayers. He knows the most secret desires of every heart and is the essence of love and forgiveness. God is directly accessible to everybody and man's soul itself is a part of the Immortal One'

GOD'S NAME

As belief in the All-pervading Unity is the basic belief of Sikhism, similarly, *simran*, or the remembrance of God's Name by constant repetition, is the basic practise. This is more important and fundamental than any of the ceremonies forms and symbols which are, in fact, only supplementary to the religious practise. This remembrance consists of the constant and regular application of the mind to the many different aspects of God by which He is known to mankind. God's attributes are, in fact, so numerous and great that it is beyond the power of man's mind to encompass them all. The voluminous Sikh scriptures (The GURU GRANTH and the DASM GRANTH) are largely devoted to the enumeration and praise of God's attributes, so that learning and repeating of passages from the scriptures is one way of remembering him. In *Sukhmani*, Guru Arjan says :

" The praising of His Name is the highest of all practises ;
It has upraised many a human soul.
It slakes the desire of the restless mind,
And imparts an all-seeing vision.
To a man of praise Death loses all its terrors ;
He feels all his hopes fulfilled ;
His mind is cleaned of all impurities ;
And is filled with the ambrosial Name.
God resides in the tongue of the good.
O that I were the slave of their slaves." (Sukhmani I.4)

The Divine remembrance may also be effected by the repetition of one particular name, such as "*Wahiguru*" meaning " Wonderful Lord." which is in common use among Sikhs. However, a mere mechanical repetition, i.e., without having 'heart and soul' in it, should be avoided. The very object of remembrance is to bring the devotee into closer contact with God and it should, therefore, be performed with love for the Master and longing of the soul to be nearer to Him. and yet nearer. It is this contact between the human soul and

the Eternal Soul which is essential ; however small and tenuous it may be at first, it is, nevertheless, the first step on man's road to salvation and perfect peace. In this way, the Sikh will, in time, become conscious of the working of God in all aspects of his life ; the consciousness of His presence will eventually become natural to him, so that even in the midst of all pleasures or pain, or all the various activities of life, he will be aware of the goodness of God and the manifold blessings with which He endows the creatures of His creation.

REINCARNATION

Although Guru Nanak had great sympathy with Islam, he accepted the Hindu idea of rebirth rather than the idea of one earthly life followed by either heaven or hell. In the *Japji*, he says :

“ By His writ some have pleasure, others pain,
By His grace some are saved,
Others doomed to die relive and die again :
His will encompasseth all, there be none beside,
O Nanak, he who knows, hath no ego and no pride.”

(*Japji* 2)

Man's soul, being a minute part of the Eternal Soul, has existed from the time of Creation, and until the time it is re-absorbed into Him, it remains separate and has to change the form which is inevitably subject to death and rebirth. The ideas on reincarnation that emerge from the Sikh scriptures, are derived mainly from Hinduism, but they contain certain modifications in their Sikh adaptation. Guru Nanak believed very firmly that God is accessible to all people whatever the circumstances of their birth ; poor or rich, beggars or rulers, male or female. In the sight of God, all human beings are equal and are the children of one family with God as their Father. The inequalities which occur between one person and another, are partly because of man's own behaviour—he pays for his bad actions and reaps the rewards of his good acts. However, if a person is born in poor circumstances, he still has the right, and indeed, the obligation, to try to improve himself, both spiritually and socially.

Man's soul evolves through all stages of existence, beginning with the most primitive forms of life, until finally, it receives the supreme gift of human form. In this latter form, he is blessed with the attributes of communication and reasoning, and is consequently enabled to appreciate the works of his Creator and to make conscious efforts to seek a reunion with God. Guru Arjan says :

“ Since you have now acquired this human frame,
This is your opportunity to become one with God :
All other labours are of no use ;
Seek the company of the holy and glorify God's name.”

(*Rehiras* 9)

The ancient Hindu philosophy envisaged that every man must remain in the station of life to which he had been born, and he was therefore forbidden by social sanctions, to change from it ; in other words, the caste system formed a rigid part of religion. Guru Nanak

taught that every human being—even though he were a poor man with a menial occupation, had dignity and value in the sight of God, consequently, every person had the inherent right to change his religion, his occupation or his station in life, if he so wished. Not only that, the Guru himself, on occasions, performed manual labour, and by his example he demonstrated that every honest occupation was honourable.

The Gurus believed that there are many worlds besides the world we know, and that there are many planes of existence. This can be interpreted in both the spiritual and the physical sense ; also, heaven and hell are not necessarily abodes for the good and the evil respectively, nor are they future states to be experienced after death, but they can be experienced here and now in our earthly life. Birth and death are merely changes in the course of life ; as a snake casts off its old skin, so the soul leaves the old body and enters a new one. It is a matter of good fortune that the burdens of past memories, regrets and guilt are cast off too, and the being is elevated into a fresh atmosphere.

THE GOAL OF LIFE

“ The Lord of man and beast is working in all ; His presence is scattered everywhere ; there is none else to be seen.

1. One talk, another listens : God is in both.

He is the Unity and Himself the Diversity.

(*Sukhmani XXII. 1*)

According to Sikh theology, therefore, it is clear that man's soul is, itself, a part of God. It is obvious, however, that human beings are, generally, unaware of the divine spark in themselves ; they are far less conscious of the purpose of their existence. According to Guru Nanak, the purpose of human life is to enable the being to appreciate the fact of his relationship with the Eternal Spirit and to facilitate his becoming reunited with Him. When man begins to remember God with love in his heart, his evaluation of worldly pleasures and attachments is inevitably altered. By modelling his life on the perfection of God, and believing in the will of God, he hereby wins God's grace ; on attaining this, he is released from the cycle of births and deaths and is reunited with God in perfect bliss :

“ Whomsoever He chooses He unites with Himself ;

And the chosen one applies himself to His love and sings His praises ;

He comes to believe in Him with hearty faith.

And knows that all action proceeds from the One alone.”

(*Sukhmani XXII. 3*)

ILLUSION AND SUFFERING

Man, says the Guru, is led astray by *Maya*, or Illusion. The world itself is real enough ; its unreality is mirrored only from the way in which man looks at it. Thus, when man begins to see God within himself, in others and in the whole world about him, he breaks the bonds of illusion, and gains peace of mind. Man suffers for two reasons ; first because he either did not appreciate God's creation or he has chosen to forget His existence ; secondly, his mind is not under control with the result that it is fixed on worldly pleasures, wealth, power and self-indulgence. He is then led into an endless chain of actions which are

not according to the ways of God, but properly consist of sin and selfishness, for which he has to pay the price in misery and suffering. The farther he remains from God, the more he suffers.

The entire span of human life, whether long or short, is a testing ground for the spirit. Having been endowed with a soul, which is essentially a spark of the Divine, man is initially innocent and free from impurities. Such innocence, however, has no virtue, since the human being has not yet had the opportunity of trying its higher attributes. Experience, knowledge and wisdom are only gained by hard work and a dedicated life. As steel, tempered in the fire, comes out tough and unbreakable, so the soul, after being tempered in the fire of a good life, comes out the readier for its final task. In the various ups and downs of life, when the human being goes through the trials of toughness, resilience, courage and temptations; strength and weakness, ignorance and knowledge, happiness and sorrow, harmony and discord, the soul finally exerts its divinity and leads man on the path of goodness to his eternal goal. Guru Nanak said :

“ Adversity is a medicine and comfort a disease,
because in comfort there is no yearning for God.”

(*Asa di Var XII. 1*)

These, then, are the underlying beliefs of Sikhism and the basic philosophy upon which all subsequent Sikh thought has developed. It may take one life-time or longer to achieve these, but there is hope for all mankind. The Creator does not forsake His created ones, but constantly facilitates their progress with a view to their final salvation. Guru Nanak and his successors did their best to educate the people to bear this in mind. It would be well for us to follow their teachings.

THE GURU

Those who earnestly desire to seek union with God, must discipline their lives and they must live according to certain moral principles, some of which are universally accepted, while others may be peculiar to the dictates of their own society or community. It must be the object of each member to be a credit to his particular group, be it social or religious. There is generally a goal, to achieve which generally requires study, guidance or discipline. When it comes to direct communication with God, it becomes almost imperative to have someone of experience to show him the way.

“ As a pillar supports the roof of a house,
So does the Guru's word prop up the mortal's spirit.
As a stone laden in a boat can go across a stream,
So can the disciple attached to the feet of the Guru across the
ocean of life.

Darkness is dispelled by the light of a lamp,
So is man's inner self illumined by the Guru's smiling face.
As in the wilderness a benighted traveller picks out his path
by a flash of lightning.
So does a man find the light of his won soul by the superior
light of the Guru.

O If I could find the dust of such a saint's feet !

May God fulfil my heart's desire !”

(*Sukhmani XV 3*)

The Sikh religion no longer has any living Guru, since the line of Gurus was ended by Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Guru. He, however, left the Granth Sahib, the Sikh scriptures, to be a permanent, unchangeable guide for all faithful Sikhs for whom it has the status of a living Guru or Teacher.

THE COMPANY OF SAINTS

Man also needs the company of good people, so that by their example and guidance, he may be able to keep his mind steadfastly towards that which is true and righteous, and then be freed from the baneful influence of evil desires and low thoughts :

“ In the company of saints, man learns how to turn enemies into friends,

As he becomes completely free from evil,
And bears malice to none.

In the company of the good, there is no swerving from the path,
No looking down upon anybody as evil.

Man sees all round him the Lord of Supreme Joy,
And freeing himself from the feverish sense of self,
Abandons all pride.

Such is the efficacy of fellowship with a holy man, whose
greatness is known only to the Lord :

The servant of the Ideal is akin to his Master.”

(Sukhmani VII 3)

OBEDIENCE

The Gurus valued very highly the qualities of devotion and loyalty which help the devotee to have faith and to discipline his actions. They did not look for servility and blind faith, but all the succeeding Gurus won their place of honour either by passing the test of perfect obedience towards their Master, or by being acclaimed by their followers as being the most meritorious :

“ The disciple who puts himself to school with the Guru
Should bear with all that comes from him.

He should not show himself off in any way ;

But should rather occupy himself with the thoughts of God
And surrender his heart to the Guru.”

Sukhmani XVIII 2)

Servility and blind faith are obnoxious. Obedience, on the other hand, is possible only when the qualities of the Master are such that inspire in the disciple absolute trust and create perfect love and understanding between the disciple and his Guru. The same rule of obedience applies to man in his relationship with God : man must live his life according to the will of God. What each man does with his own life, the religion which he should follow, and the manner in which he must serve his fellows, is primarily determined by God's will. No two human beings are alike ; therefore, it is not the same for each man. For every individual it differs, according to the circumstances of his birth, his inherent abilities and differences of environment. By cultivating the habit of remembering God's name, and of praying for guidance, and above all, by listening to the voice of God within himself, anybody can discover what is God's will with regard to his own life. When a

person ignores or disobeys God's will, he becomes like a swimmer having gone beyond his depth, trying to make headway against a strong current. He can go on swimming in the wrong direction, but he will not get very far. Inevitably he will be overtaken by fatigue and exhaustion. On the other hand, he who works according to God's will and takes heed of the voice within himself, will find that even seemingly impossible projects become successful :

"The believer's way is of obstructions free ;
 The believer is honoured in the presence sublime ;
 The believer's path is not lost in futility,
 For faith hath taught him law divine."

(Japji 14)

SERVICE

The way to salvation is a twofold path : the path of love or *simran* and the path of *seva*, or service to mankind. Love means little until it is exposed in action, so the Sikh cannot rightly remain inactive, but of necessity, he must engage himself in the affairs of the world, while also following the path of earnest meditation. He is expected to seize every opportunity of helping his fellow-beings and of serving them in any way he can, without expecting rewards. To do this, therefore, he must have no selfish desires ; his mind must be free of greed and attachment to power or riches, and he must have a truly humble heart.

BROTHERHOOD

"The Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man" is one of the main themes of Guru Nanak's message. All are welcomed into the fold of Sikhism without regard to caste, class, colour, race, sex, or creed ; all are treated on equal terms. Nobody is, therefore, favoured simply because of superior birth or secular influence. One of the main complaints of the Hindus against Guru Gobind Singh, the Tenth Guru, was that by creating the Khalsa, he was destroying the caste system. It is to be remembered that since Guru Nanak's day, it had been customary for all visitors to the Guru's court to eat together at the communal free kitchen (*langar*) provided ; and it was the Guru's rule that no-one be looked down upon or refused. There is no priestly class or religious hierarchy amongst the Sikhs, and any Sikh man or woman may take part in the religious ceremonies, as well as officiate at these. These principles Guru Gobind Singh maintained. When man reaches the stage where he sees God in all things and in all hearts, the ideal of brotherhood comes naturally to him.

HUMILITY

No man can aspire to reach God if his own heart is full of pride and egotism. Man must alway beware of the pitfall of assumed or false humility. Even deliberate self-abasement can be a form of pride, since it arises out of egotism and self-esteem. True humility lies in being aware of one's own abilities and shortcomings ; it lies in the knowledge that God alone is the Doer of all actions ; He alone is the Giver of all gifts ; it is only by His favour that we enjoy riches, honour and achievement in this world. Without Him, we are nothing :

"It is the Lord's bounty which enables you to indulge in so much charity ;

Think of Him day and night, O man !"

(Sukhmani VI 5)

“ He is a prince among men
 Who has effaced his pride in the company of the good
 He who deems himself as of the lowly,
 Shall be esteemed as the highest of the high.
 He who lowers his mind to the dust of all men's feet,
 Sees the Name of God enshrined in every heart.”

(*Sukhmani III 6*)

TOLERANCE

The virtue of tolerance goes hand in hand with humility, since they both arise out of the same attitude of mind. The tolerant man may be convinced that his own religion is the best for himself, but he does not presume to criticise the beliefs and practises of others provided that they follow theirs sincerely. Basic principles of all religions are universal and Guru Nanak recognised the goodness in all religious faiths. He therefore taught that people should fervently and sincerely practise their faiths in their daily lives.

“ Words do not the saint or sinner make,
 Action alone is written in the book of fate.” (Japji 20)

LIVING IN THE WORLD

Not much can be achieved by having high thoughts if these are merely confined in the mind. Similarly, the uttering of words alone does not mean much unless they are followed by actions. Therefore, the Sikh is enjoined not to seek retirement from life, and not to become a hermit or live a life of asceticism or lonesome meditation. Guru Nanak said that man can reach God even while living in the world, and going about his normal worldly duties. The demands of home and family and society must be met to one's best ability, and the Sikh must earn his living by honest labour. Society, friendship and love, having been divinely bestowed upon man, self-denial and asceticism are not normally called for, and man is entitled to enjoy the rightful pleasures of life, provided that he does not over-indulge in these. He must, at the same time, be ready to bear with fortitude, the vicissitudes of life :

“ Nanak I have met the true Guru and my union with God is
 accomplished ;
 Salvation can be achieved even while men are laughing,
 playing, wearing fine clothes and eating.”

(*Guru Arjan, Gajari ki Var*)

GRATITUDE AND NON-ATTACHMENT

The important thing for the Sikh to remember is that while he is entitled to the good things of life, he should recognise that these are the gifts of God and he should, therefore, praise and thank God for them. He should always make himself worthy of these and if need be, he should learn to curtail his wants and help the more needy. It is inevitable that while he desires and holds on to worldly things for his own sake, he will be less able to serve others disinterestedly ; he must of necessity learn not to be attached to such things and not to regard anything as being wholly and completely his own :

" The Divine Banker advances countless gifts to man as his capital
 Which is used by him in eating and drinking and merry-making.
 But the moment the Owner takes back some of this trust,
 The fool begins to feel offended ;
 Thus by his own act he loses credit with the Master,
 Who will not trust him again :
 If, however, he were to return the gift to its Owner,
 Willingly surrendering it on demand,
 He would bless him four times more.
 The Master is so generous !"

(*Sukhmani V 2*)

An attitude of non-attachment, and a complete trust in the goodness of God and His Fatherly concern with our welfare, will naturally lead to contentment. This does not mean that we are entirely unconcerned about what happens to us or that we are necessarily satisfied with things as they are. God's will is that mankind should always diligently fight adversity and consistently strive to make life better than it is, not only for himself, but for everybody. Contentment is the acceptance with good grace, of those conditions which are beyond our powers to change, and a recognition that until God gives us the means to change them, He does not want us to worry too much about them. This attitude of mind is amply borne out in the life of Guru Gobind Singh, who always fought hard, but never grieved over his losses.

" The man of Present-salvation is one
 Who loves God's will with his heart and soul
 He meets joy and sorrow with an equal mind.
 He is ever happy ; no pain of separation for him !
 To him the coveted gold is no more than dust,
 And the promised nectar is no sweeter than the bitter cup of
 poison.
 He is indifferent to honour and dishonour.
 And makes no distinction between a prince and a pauper.
 For him whatever comes from God is most reasonable ;
 Such a man may be said to have attained immortality while
 yet a mortal."

(*Sukhmani IX 7*)

COURAGE

Guru Gobind Singh held in esteem people who firmly adhered to their principles and who had the courage of their convictions. It was natural, therefore, that he would deem such courage to be the prime quality that could save Sikhism from extinction. Throughout the course of Sikh history, thousands of Sikh martyrs have shown the capacity for physical endurance and the requisite moral courage in the maintenance of their integrity and high principles. It is, however, infinitely easier to die for a faith than to live for it, since death is like the momentary opening and shutting of a door, while life means continued suffering for as long as the spark of life is there, for the purpose of striving for the ideal.

A Sikh is expected to have the courage to speak out against injustice, corruption and any other sort of evil, and the courage to uphold truth in the face of threats or various worldly temptations : he must not

shrink from doing that which he believes to be right, whatever may be the consequences to himself. This kind of courage is not as spectacular as martyrdom or the deed of bravery which all the world can see ; it often goes unrequited and unrecognised by others. Sometimes, it is even ridiculed, but its reward lies in the increased strength of spirit which results from it.

“ O God, grant me this boon ;
Never should I turn away from good deeds ;
Nor when fighting adversity should I be afraid ;
But with a firm resolve, should I achieve victory ;
Over my heart should I have complete control.
O Lord, that is what I crave of Thy Name.
When finally time comes for me to rest,
Let me die in the thick of these battles.”

(Guru Gobind Singh)

PURITY

The influences surrounding humanity are tinged with evil to a great extent. Therefore, if a Sikh is to combat these evil influences of the world, he must learn to keep his own mind pure. There are sins and sins ; but five primary sins are listed in the Sikh scriptures :

“ I come to take refuge with the Lord ;
May the Divine Guru out of His mercy grant that the passions
of lust, anger, greed, pride and undue attachment in me may
vanish and leave me in peace.”

(Sukhmani VI Prologue)

For a man to become free of these, he must of necessity occupy his mind with such thoughts as would inculcate in him, humility and selflessness, and encourage him towards good and noble things. In other words, he will have to have positive and constructive thoughts which can only come when the mind is immersed in the Name of God. Evil thoughts gain easy entry into the idle mind, so if the mind is kept carefully under control, good actions are bound to flow from it and in this way, constant spiritual improvement is achieved.

SUMMARY

Thus, the teachings of the Sikh Gurus do not dogmatise, nor do they specify any permanently demarcated moral injunctions, such as “ Thou shalt not kill ” or “ Thou shalt not steal.” Instead, the ethical code which is indicated throughout the scriptures naturally arises out of a few simple fundamental ideas which are common to all human society. That main idea is to love God’s Name, and above all things, to desire a union with Him. As He is the Creator of all, this ideology naturally leads to service of mankind. Man is weak, in the sense that he likes to take the line of least resistance. He, therefore, easily becomes a prey to sin ; but when he takes a little trouble and turns towards God, he acquires the ability to escape. This effort of mankind is rewarded by God’s grace.

According to the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, man is not fundamentally evil ; he is basically and originally good. Under the baneful influence of evil, however, this basic goodness is overshadowed and

man is thus constrained to rediscover it during the course of his human life. The human form is the supreme gift which is bestowed on man by God's grace, and it is through His grace that man derives the capacity to remember God ; through grace, too, man comes to know of his divine origin and makes the effort to merge finally into that Divine source. It is a unique phenomenon of His Creation that God granted to man the supreme experience of knowing His presence :

“ Thanks to the Guru, I have seen God within me,
And His Name tastes sweet to me.
The whole world of Matter is contained within one Mind,
Although it appears so various in colour and form.
The ambrosial Name of God is the source of all conceivable joys ;
It lives in the body ;
And the strains of its divine music are heard in the silent
 recesses of the heart.
The ecstasy of its wonder cannot be described :
It can only be felt by those who are granted the vision.
They alone can conceive it.”

(*Sukhmani XXIII 1*)

“ Vain is the life of the godless.
How can one be pure unless purified by Truth ?
Worthless is the life that is dark and unillumined by the Name ;
It stinks in the nostrils of others.
As the crop in a field goes waste without rain.
So the days and nights unblessed by the Name pass in vain.
All works are meaningless unless inspired by the love of God,
As is the money of the miser put to no use.
Blessed are they in whose hearts dwells the love of the Name.
I pour out my life as an offering to them.”

(*Sukhmani V6 Guru Arjan, translated by Teja Singh*)

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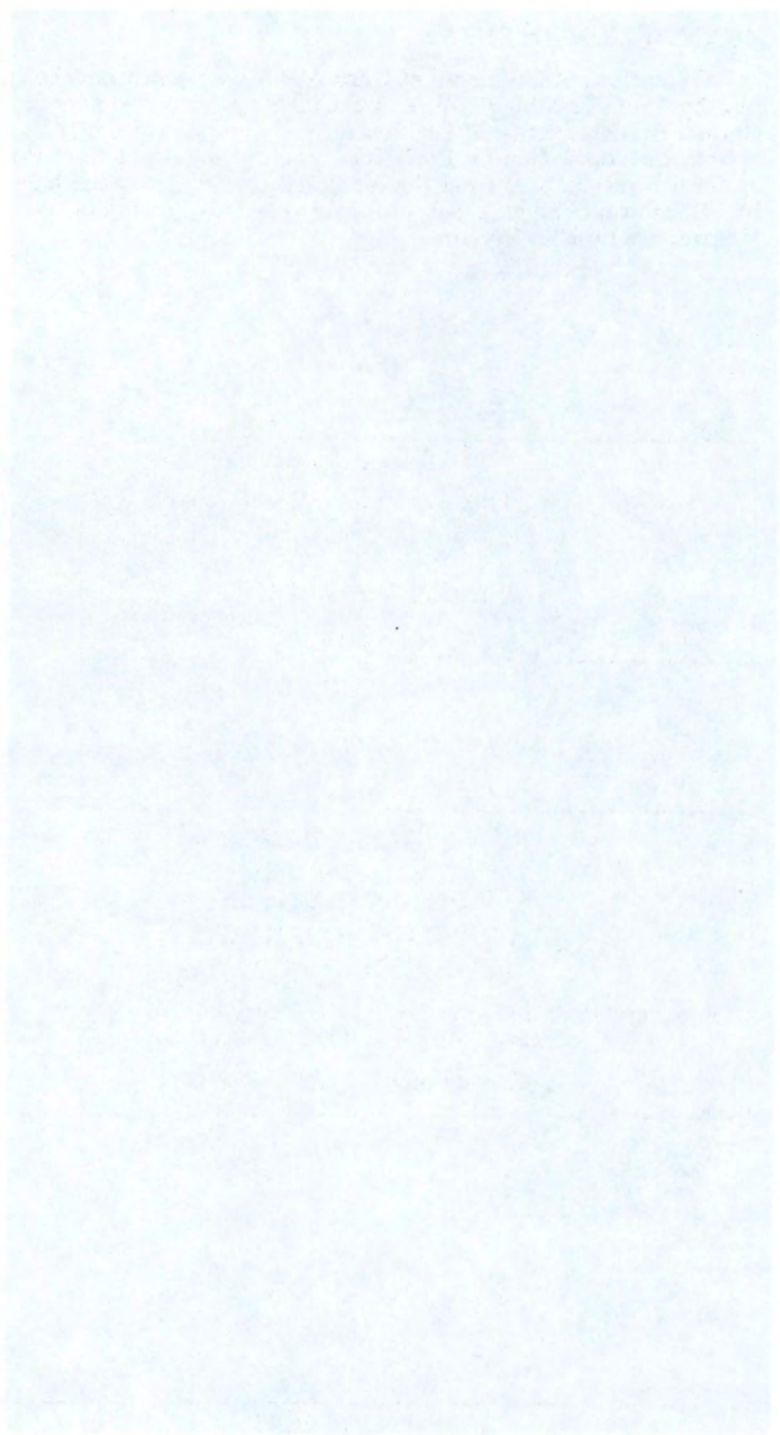
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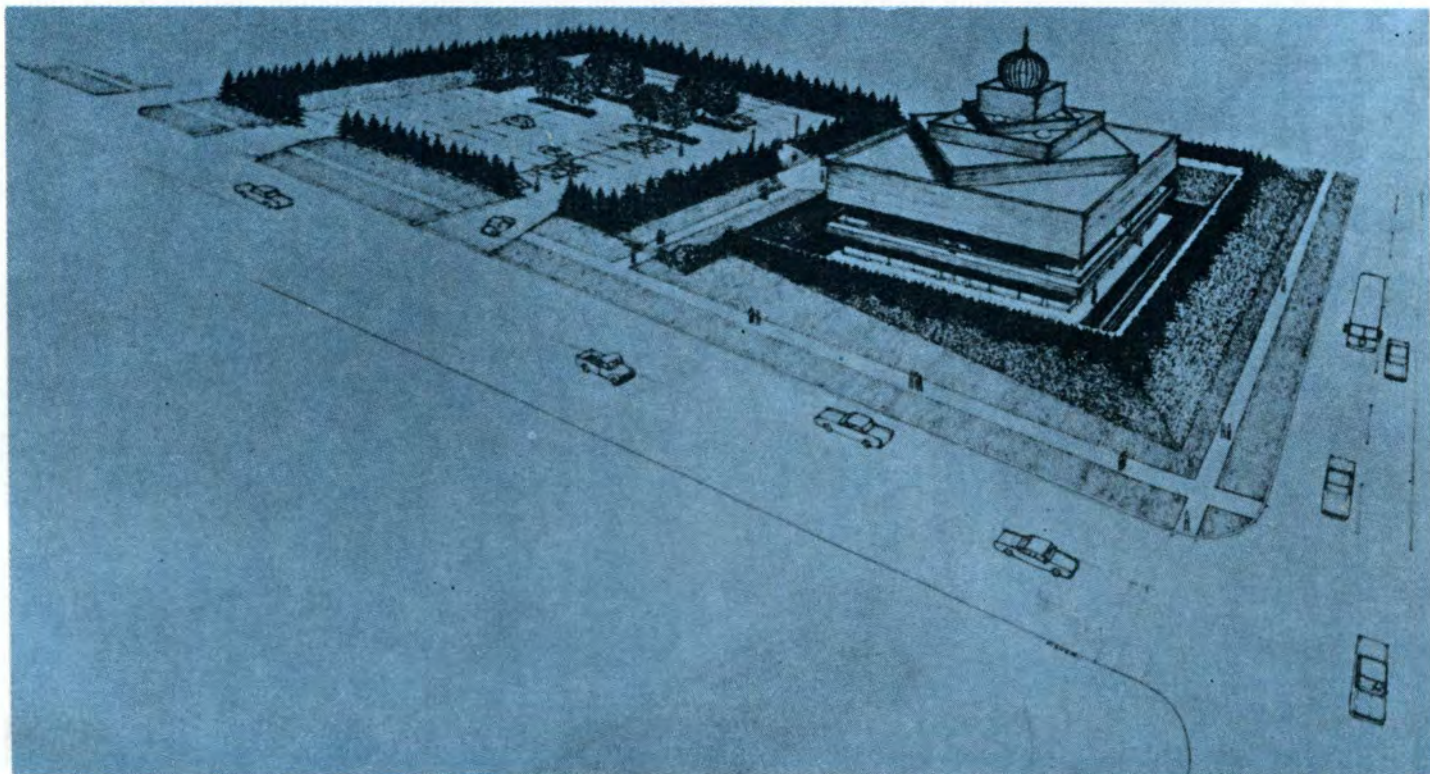
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