Introduction to the history, practices, and principles of Sikhs.
In Loving Memory of

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One who calls himself a Sikh of the Guru, the True Guru, shall rise in the early morning hours and meditate on the Lord’s Name.

Upon arising early in the morning, he is to bathe, and cleanse himself in the pool of nectar.

Following the instructions of the Guru, he is to chant the Name of the Lord, Har, Har. All sins, misdeeds, and negativity shall be erased.

Then, at the rising of the sun, he is to sing Gurbani; whether sitting down or standing up, he is to meditate on the Lord’s Name.

One who meditates on my Lord, Har, Har, with every breath and every morsel of food, that Gursikh becomes pleasing to the Guru’s Mind.

That person unto whom my Lord and Master is kind and compassionate, upon that Gursikh the Guru’s teachings are bestowed.

Servant Nanak begs for the dust of the feet of that Gursikh, who himself chants the Name, and inspires others to do so.

~ Gauri Fourth Guru
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Introduction

Dear Friend,

Have you ever come across a person with a long beard, wearing a turban, and wondered who they were? That person belongs to the Sikh (pr. seek) faith, a religion over 500 years old that originated in India. The Sikh faith is one of the youngest of the major organized world religions, and fifth largest in the world. Sikhs do not actively recruit converts, although they readily welcome those who wish to embrace the faith of their own accord. For this reason, as well as its relative newness, the Sikh faith is something of a mystery to many people. Their distinct style of dress makes Sikhs stand out, but little else is known about them.

The Sikh religion was started by Guru Nanak as a way of worship that could be enjoyed by all people. He built it upon practices that gave people such simple dignities as having enough to eat, broke down class barriers by having them sit and worship together as one, created strong families by upholding the sanctity of marriage and family, and enabled everyone to express their love for the Creator by singing God’s praises.

This booklet will introduce you to basic Sikh teachings and practices so that you will know how Sikhs work and worship. Although it is over 500 years old, the Sikh lifestyle is dynamic and very relevant to living in today’s world. With greater awareness of each other’s cultures and beliefs, we can work together for the good of all people.
Sacred Writings

“The Word is the Guru and the Guru is the Word and in the Word is all the nectar.” – Guru Ram Das

The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, delivered his message to the world in the form of divine poetic song. He called this poetic song the Shabd Guru, the Holy Word of God, and said that it was his own Guru or teacher. He recorded his own shabds, or verses, in a book that he carried with him called a pothi. When he passed his light on to his successor, Guru Angad, he passed along the pothi as well. These sacred verses were transmitted in this way up to the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, who compiled them into the Adi Granth, which he installed at the Golden Temple in 1604.

There was a number of blank pages left in the Adi Granth, which Guru Arjan said would be completed by one of his successors. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, completed the Shabd Guru by adding a number of compositions of his father, the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. Known as the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, it is the only version compiled by the Gurus in their own words, and is recognized by all Sikhs as the pathway to God.

Just before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh invested the Guruship upon the Siri Guru Granth Sahib. He said that there would be no more human Gurus after him and that it would be the living Guru of the Sikhs for all time. The Shabd Guru is treated with the same respect that would be shown to a Guru in human form.

These shabds were created to elevate the consciousness of those who sing and recite them, and it is through singing them that their true power is conveyed. The Shabd Guru is arranged in thirty-one sections according to the raag (traditional Indian melody) in which they are to be sung. Within the sections, the
poems are arranged from those written by the earliest of the Sikh Gurus to the Hindu, Muslim, and Sufi compositions.

The text is written in the gurmukhi script created by Guru Angad and contains many languages, including Punjabi, Sanskrit, Persian and other dialects prevalent at that time in Northern India. The Shabd Guru has been translated into Punjabi, English, and Spanish.

The Shabd Guru consists of 1,430 pages of divinely inspired poems about the grandeur of God’s creation and the journey of the soul through life to union with God. It contains poems by six of the ten Gurus and thirty-six Hindu, Muslim, and Sufi saints written when they were in the highest state of consciousness. The use of song and poetry to convey these teachings is unique among the sacred texts of the world.
Basic Beliefs

Those who have such blessed destiny written on their foreheads, meditate on the Treasure of the Name – Guru Arjan

Sikh means student of Truth; Dharma means spiritual path. Sikh Dharma means ‘The spiritual path of the student of Truth.’ It is a path of progressive experience. Guru Nanak founded Sikh Dharma in India more than 500 years ago. People were inspired toward a way of life that could give them the experience of God-realization. Guru means that which brings you from darkness to light. Guru Nanak taught that there is One God who lives inside of as well as beyond His creation, who generates, organizes and delivers everything in the universe. A person can elevate his consciousness by meditating on the Name of God. Sikhs often say, Sat Nam and Whahe Guru. Sat Nam means True Name. For Sikhs, the distinctive name of the Supreme Being is Whahe Guru, which means Wondrous, Indescribable Wisdom. Guru Nanak taught his followers to worship God by serving His creation.

Sikh Dharma had ten consecutive founders, called Gurus. The light of Nanak was passed on through nine successors. The last human Guru was Guru Gobind Singh, who established the Siri Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal living Guru for the ages. The Siri Guru Granth Sahib is the collection of the hymns of Sikh Gurus, Hindu, Muslim and Sufi saints, sung while they were in a state of God-consciousness. Sikhs worship and bow to the Word of God in the form of these sacred writings; they do not bow to any person.

Sikh Dharma is a universal in its approach. Guru Nanak respected others’ ways of worship, if done sincerely. For this reason, Sikhs respect all faiths, believing God creates many paths for His many people.

A Sikh lives as God made him, believing God makes us as we are for good reasons. Therefore, a Sikh does not cut his/her hair. The hair on the head channels the sun energy into the brain, each hair
an antenna to help increase our intelligence, strength, and awareness. The hair is our crowning glory. The hair on other parts of our body helps to balance the nervous system. A man's beard helps to keep him emotionally balanced. A Sikh wears a turban in public to protect the hair and keep the mind focused. The turban serves as a spiritual crown. Wearing it, a Sikh presents him or herself as a person devoted to God's service.

A Sikh rises about two and a half hours before dawn, takes a cold shower and meditates on God's Name. Before dawn, the sun's rays strike the earth in an upward, energizing way. They help raise the consciousness of a meditator. The blessed quiet of this special time of day makes meditation easier than during the noisier times of day.

Sikhs look upon anyone other than their spouse as a parent, sibling or child. They do not have sex outside of marriage.

Sikhs live a healthy lifestyle, respecting the body as a temple for the soul. They maintain a healthy diet and many are vegetarians. Sikhs take no alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, except for medical purposes. Sikhs use God's name as their only intoxicant.

Sikhs earn their living righteously and share with others. Sikhs live in a spirit of love and kindness, always ready to help others in God's Name.
**Distinctive Clothing – Bana**

“The Purify what is impure, and let the Lord’s Presence be your religious tradition. Let your total awareness be the turban on your head.” – Guru Arjan

The purpose of Sikh dress is comparable to that of clothing worn by priests and nuns in Catholic religion, or the uniform of a fireman. It makes the wearer immediately identifiable as a member of that particular group, instills a cohesive bond among the members themselves, and reminds them that the purpose of their life is to serve others. Called bana, it reflects the formal requirements laid down by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 as well as the influence of traditional dress patterns of Northern Indian culture. As with any other religion, there are degrees of adherence and regional influence. The most devout Sikhs will keep the five K’s and bana, while others may cut their hair and wear only the kara.

Guru Gobind Singh gave the five K’s (discussed in Symbols section) to the Sikhs to strengthen and solidify their unique identity. Outwardly visible are the kesh (uncut hair and beard), kara (steel bracelet), and kirpan (ceremonial knife). Kachcheras are worn in the fashion of shorts and the kanga is a wooden comb kept in the hair. Since his Khalsa were spiritual warriors, he gave them a royal/military style of dress, a long shirt called a chola, worn over kachcheras or long pants tapered at the ankle called churidars, fastened at the waist with a cummerband. This way of dressing gives the Khalsa an aura of regal spiritual authority and commitment.

Men wearing turbans and full beards are the most easily identified as Sikhs. Devout Sikhs keep all of their bodily hair, kesh, from birth, which often results in very long hair. The last Sikh Guru in human form laid down this precept for the Khalsa, who are baptized Sikhs. Sikhs arrange their hair on top of the head in many ways, including a rishi knot for men.
Death and Beyond

"To reach your true home after you die, you must conquer death while you are alive." – Guru Nanak

Sikhs believe that in the beginning, the soul and God are one. As God is infinite and undying, so is the soul. Upon creation, the soul emerges from God to be born into physical existences or incarnations. The soul typically incarnates as the simplest life form and advances progressively to higher and higher existences. Each lifetime on earth is a school of experiences where lessons are learned. It is said that it takes 8.4 million incarnations to achieve human form; thus, the gift of life as a human is not to be wasted. Death is a process of the soul's discarding one body in the former life for another in the next. Called the wheel of transmigration, this process is the source of suffering and pain because it is always the soul's desire to merge with the Creator again. When a person is ready, they will meet a Guru or spiritual teacher who will lead them upon a Dharma, or path of life, that will free them from the cycle of birth and death.

The Guru teaches a person how to return to the Creator again. For Sikhs, the living Guru is now embodied in Siri Guru Granth Sahib, their sacred writings. These sacred writings flowed through the Sikh Gurus and others saints who, in a state of God-conscious ecstasy, gave the technology for reuniting with the Creator. This path or Dharma included doing good deeds, working hard, sharing with others and, above all, praising God's Name. The sacred words contain the key for

and women, braids for children, and buns at the back of the neck for women. As a sign of respect for the Creator, Sikhs cover their heads in several ways as well. Men wear turbans, women wear a turban of a different style and/or a sheer scarf called a chuni, boys wear a topknot-style turban called a patka, and girls wear a turban and/or chuni. Sikh women never cover their faces with their chunis. Turbans may be of any color; generally, colors do not designate rank or affiliation. Although cutting of hair is highly discouraged, the faith teaches Sikhs to be tolerant and non-judgmental at the same time.

Modesty is a virtue to Sikhs. Some wear Western-style clothes, others Indian-style, such as ladies’ knee-length dresses and full pants called salwar kameez, and men’s tunic-length shirts with Mandarin collars and pajama-style pants called kurta pajamas. Sikhs with strong ties to India often wear clothes in a bold range of colors. Sikhs from the West often wear white. In general, the clothes of the Sikhs are comfortable for sitting on the floor and tend toward ease of movement and a graceful flow of material.
Symbols

“The devotees’ lifestyle is unique and distinct; they follow the most difficult path...the path they take is sharper than a double-edged sword and finer than a hair’s breadth.” – Guru Amar Das

There are five Sikh symbols along with the turban which constitute the uniform of the Khalsa. Collectively the symbols are known as the five K’s. They remind Sikhs of their aim to follow the ideals of the Sikh Gurus:

1. **Kesh** means uncut hair. All the Sikh Gurus encouraged their followers to leave their hair uncut. God created our hair as an integral and functional part of our bodies. The tenth Guru made it a requirement of his *Khalsa* as a sign of living in harmony with the will of God.

2. **Kanga** or wooden comb is a symbol of cleanliness and is used to keep the uncut hair tidy. It is easily worn under the turban and is not only practical but also keeps one’s thoughts untangled and focused on the Name of God.

3. **Kara** is a steel bracelet that reminds the Sikh that he will bow down only to God and *Guru* and never a man. Because it is worn on the wrist, it reminds the Sikh to do no evil with his hands.

4. **Kachchera** are the soldier’s shorts and are a symbol of chastity. Apart from the reminder to be moral, they are practical, allowing easy movement with modesty. They are worn as undergarments, but also can be worn in hot weather, for swimming or during sports.

5. **Kirpan** or sword embodies courage and self-defense. It comes from two words: *kirpa* and *aan*. *Kirpa* means an act of kindness and *aan* means honor, respect, and self-respect. On a practical level it gives the Sikh freedom...
from persecution and the ability to protect the weak and oppressed. It symbolizes the dignity of the spirit and the willingness to sacrifice oneself to defend the truth.

The power of the five K’s and the turban is that they make the Sikh stand out. He is known to all and must act righteously and in accordance with the teachings of the Sikh Gurus at all times.

Additionally, two other symbols, the *Adi Shakti* or *Khanda* and *Ik Onkar*, have special meaning for the Sikhs:

*Adi Shakti (Khanda)* is the official Sikh insignia. The word *Adi* means primal and *Shakti* means creative feminine energy. This symbol has three parts to its design:

- **Chakra** is the circle that reminds Sikhs of God’s infinite nature, which has no beginning nor end, and the unity of mankind regardless of race, caste, religion or gender.
- **Khanda** is the straight double-edged sword and represents the straight and narrow path, the razor’s edge that must be walked to stay on the path of righteousness.
- **Kirpans** are the two curved single-edged swords on either side of the symbol. Guru Hargobind wore two such swords, signifying *Piri* or spiritual sovereignty on the left and *Miri* signifying political and temporal power on the right.

*Ik Onkar* is the first statement in the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*. All of the following 1,430 pages expound on this essential statement: There is One God who created this creation. The first figure on the left is *Ik*, which is the actual character for the number one; the second figure is *Onkar*, which means God who created the creation. The symbol is a verbal and visual statement of a central Sikh tenet and is depicted many places, on jewelry, buildings, canopies etc.
Golden Temple

“One’s sins are washed away by bathing in the Nectar Tank of Guru Ram Das.” – Guru Arjan

The vision for the Golden Temple came from the fourth Guru, Guru Ram Das. He excavated the area around a spring known for its healing powers, which turned it into a huge pool of water. In 1601, his son, Guru Arjan, the fifth Sikh Guru, built the Golden Temple, also known as the Harimandir Sahib, or ‘House of God’ in the center of this pool. Built half of marble and half of gold, its doors face the four directions to welcome people of all faiths and all walks of life. Beautiful precious stones are inlaid in the marble walls. Like a shimmering golden ship, the Golden Temple rests serenely upon the pool; its image reflected in the water that surrounds it.

In 1604, the sacred writings of the Sikhs, called the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, were enthroned inside the Golden Temple. The Temple is always filled with the sound of the songs of the Guru, from the time that the Temple doors open at 2:30 AM until they are closed at 10 PM. Even in the middle of the night, the night crew recites the sacred words as they clean the sanctuary.

The offerings and labor of the congregation built the Golden Temple. To this day, volunteers young and old maintain it. Guesthouses provide housing to all visitors. Volunteers donate and prepare the free meal, the Guru ka Langar, which they serve to all who come to visit. For these reasons, the Harimandir Sahib is the most cherished destination of millions of Sikhs around the world, and thousands of visitors, who come for a ‘sip and a dip’, to uplift their own spirits and those of others through their selfless service.
Family Life

“The faithful uplift their family and relations.” – Guru Nanak

Family life is an important element of spiritual practice for Sikhs. The goal is to remember God and practice the highest moral values while participating in the daily activities of work and family.

When a man and woman join together to marry and begin family life, they vow to be committed to each other and to God. The words that are both recited and sung during the ceremony describe the stages of married life as an analogy of the soul’s journey toward union with the divine. The man and woman are equal partners in the journey of marriage. As early as the fifteenth century, the Sikh Gurus were revolutionary in their teachings of the equality of women. Women enjoy all the rights and privileges of Sikh family and religious life.

Raising children with spiritual values within a material culture is a challenge for Sikhs and all peoples of faith. When a Sikh child is born, prayers are recited and a name with spiritual significance from *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* is chosen. Most religious education takes place in the home, but in many communities Sikhs have established Sunday schools, summer camps and schools to assist families in training the children. Often, parents invite the congregation to share in songs and prayers to celebrate birthdays, graduations, and other important events in the lives of their children.

Work to support self and family is considered a sacred responsibility. Earning a righteous and honest living, then sharing with others is considered a privilege. Sikhs have been respected throughout the world as creative and industrious workers and they have created businesses and service organizations to provide well for their own families and to share with the greater human family.
Institutions

“Through selfless service, eternal peace is obtained.”
– Guru Amar Das

The basic practices of Sikhs support a spiritual community based upon justice, equality, hard work, fellowship, service, meditation, prayer, and humility.

Spiritual Practice - Sadhana and Nam Simran
Sadhana, daily discipline, begins several hours before daybreak in the time called the Amrit Vela. First, Sikhs cleanse their body and mind by taking a cold rinse while singing God’s praises. This practice prepares them for meditation on God’s Name, Nam Simran, an inherent expression of the faith since the time of Guru Nanak. In meditation, they remember their soul’s connection to God. Some also include healing practices such as Kundalini Yoga to start their day.

Daily Prayers - Nitnem Banis
Sikhs recite five different prayers, or Nitnem Banis, at different times of the day. The Banis are derived from Siri Guru Granth Sahib and writings of the Tenth Guru. Each prayer has a specific purpose and meaning. Saying these prayers helps Sikhs to remember God throughout the day and night. While praying, they cover their heads and remove their shoes as a sign of respect.

Recitation of Sacred Writings - Akhand Path
A continuous reading of Siri Guru Granth Sahib is called an Akhand Path. It makes the Guru present to the congregation through its members, who sign up to read consecutively. An Akhand Path creates a powerful sacred energy field around the entire community. The Bhog ceremony, which marks the end of an Akhand Path, is a joyous occasion. Akhand Paths are traditionally performed for Sikh holidays and funerals.
Baptism - *Amrit Sanchar*
Sikhs formally adopt many of the requirements of a devout life in the baptism ceremony called *Amrit Sanchar*, originally performed in 1699 by the last Sikh Guru in human form, Guru Gobind Singh. Candidates for baptism prepare themselves well in advance and make a conscious choice to declare their commitment. Sweet water, called *amrit*, is stirred with a double-edged sword and charged by the recitation of special prayers. It is served to the candidates as a transformative medium. They pledge to live a moral life, defend the rights of others, maintain their unique outward identity by keeping the 5 K’s and wearing *bana*, and incorporate the recitation of the *Nitnem Banis* into their daily practice. Men take the name Singh (lion) and women the name Kaur (princess). Those who take *Amrit* become members of the *Khalsa Panth*, the body of pure ones, willing to give their heads to defend human rights and religious freedom.

**Distinctive Clothing - *Bana***
Devout Sikhs wear the distinctive clothes described in the sections on dress and symbols. The most notable features are long hair and beards and turbans. Such striking dress is a sign of commitment to their spiritual identity. Much like the habit worn by priests and nuns in the Christian faith, *Bana* identifies Sikhs as people dedicated to service and protection of others.

**Holy Congregation - *Sadh Sangat***
From the beginning, Sikh life has been based in service to all. The Company of the Holy is called the *Sadh Sangat*. The presence of the congregation magnifies the spiritual experience of an individual. Equality of men, women, and children is integral to the system. Most important occasions, whether of joy or sorrow, are celebrated with the *Sadh Sangat*. This supportive, multigenerational spiritual family helps overcome the fear of loneliness. In this way, the Sikh Gurus created a strong socio-spiritual fabric that would last over time.
Marriage Ceremony - Anand Karaj
In the marriage ceremony, Anand Karaj, Sikhs pledge to serve each other’s spiritual development with the support of the Sadh Sangat. As the Sikh path is that of the householder (grisht ashram), marriage is a vital sacred institution. Four vows are administered, beginning with a commitment to be true to one’s own soul and progressing to union with the Infinite Creator. Each time the couple accepts a vow, they bow to the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, then walk around it to symbolize their surrender to God’s will above all else. After all four vows are completed, the Sadh Sangat joyfully throws flower petals upon the couple to celebrate their joy and love.

Selfless Service – Nishkaam Seva
Selfless service, Nishkaam Seva, is the binding force that unites the community of the Sadh Sangat. Such service is voluntary, without expectation of personal recognition or reward. It manifests in countless humble acts great and small, such as straightening shoes, serving the homeless, or attending the Guru. Performing seva provides the opportunity to see God in each person and serve God with simple kindness. Acts of seva are critical to overcoming personal ego and developing true humility.

Worship Service - Gurdwara
Sikhs hold their worship services in consecrated temples called Gurdwaras. The Gurdwara service is a time for the Sadh Sangat to join together in spirit on a daily and/or weekly basis. The service is one of the most uplifting and nurturing events for the community. Through the combined practice of kirtan and rendering selfless service, the spirit rises to a crescendo. This upliftment, called cherdi kala, “high spirits”, provides enduring inspiration. Everyone is welcome to the Gurdwara service, whether Sikh or not. All are requested to cover their heads and remove their shoes before entering.
Free Kitchen - Guru Ka Langar

Guru Ka Langar is the community meal that follows the Gurdwara service or is served during an Akhand Path and is free to anyone who wishes to eat. Started in the time of Guru Nanak, participants sit side by side in long rows that face each other. Servers walk down the aisles with buckets of food and fill each plate. This tradition eliminated hunger so that people were able to turn their attention to God. It also broke down the caste system by making all people sit and eat together in equality. Guru Ka Langar is a time to socialize, meet new people, and rejoice in the bounty of God’s blessings. Everyone sitting in the langar lines should cover their heads and remove their shoes.

Tithing - Das Vandh

In order to support the administrative necessities of their community, Sikhs traditionally give one-tenth of their earnings, called Das Vandh. In addition, they give generous donations of money, goods, and services to the Gurdwara, free kitchen and associated outreach programs such as clinics and schools.
Worship Service

“Through the Word of the Guru’s Shabd, he sits in the eternal, unchanging house.” – Guru Amar Das

The collection of the sacred writings of the Sikhs, called the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* (the *Shabd Guru* or simply, the *Guru*), is the center of the Sikh worship service. The place where the *Guru* is installed is known as the *Gurdwara*, literally the “Gateway to the Guru.” A Sikh worship service can be held in a *Gurdwara* or in any home or building where the *Guru* is present. There are no limitations as to when a *Gurdwara* service can be held.

Wherever the *Guru* is present is a sacred space. Usually the *Gurdwara* consists of an open room where everyone sits on the floor facing the *Guru*. The *Guru* is placed upon a padded table beneath a canopy and covered with richly embroidered cloths. A person, called the *Granthi*, waves a ceremonial whisk over the *Guru* and is responsible for safeguarding it.

When entering the *Gurdwara*, the shoes and socks are removed and the head is covered as a sign of respect. One approaches the *Guru*, bows their forehead to the ground, and then makes an offering. One then joins the congregation (*sadh sangat*). Traditionally men sit on one side and women on the other, but this is not required. Out of respect, neither the feet nor the back are turned toward the *Guru*.
The usual sequence of the Gurdwara service is as follows:

**Kirtan:** The singing of hymns from the Guru (shabds) by the congregation led by musicians (ragis).

**Kathaa:** A talk illuminating the Guru’s teachings may be given.

**The Song of the Khalsa:** A song in English about the history and meaning of Khalsa.

**Anand Sahib:** Portions of the “Song of Bliss”, one of the daily Sikh prayers.

**Ardas:** The congregation stands and recites a prayer in unison and listens to the Ardas, a traditional Sikh prayer recited by one member of the congregation. The person who leads the Ardas then calls out Bole So Nihal! (‘Speak and you shall be blessed!’) to which the congregation answers Sat Siri Akal! (‘The great truth is undying!’).

**Hukam:** The congregation sits and the person sitting behind the Guru opens it and reads a passage at random which provides the Guru’s guidance to the congregation. In many Gurdwaras, after the hukam is read in Gurmukhi, it is read again in the local language to increase the understanding and appreciation of the Guru’s message.

**Prashaad:** A sweet pudding made of flour, honey, water, and ghee (clarified butter) is placed in the cupped hands of all members of the congregation at the end of the service, representing the Guru’s blessing.

**Guru ka Langar:** A community meal served as people sit together in long rows.
A Day in the Life of a Sikh

“The mortal’s business is with his own mind; one who disciplines his mind attains perfection.” – Saint Kabir

A Sikh strives to live with an attitude of gratitude; humble in the awareness that God vibrates in all particles of his or her being and in all of creation. The expression *Ang Sang Whahe Guru* means ‘In every part of my being is the ecstasy of God’s wonder.’ Sikhs live in the world, enjoying family life and serving their fellow humans. They also work to keep their consciousness lofty by internally repeating God’s Name. Sikhs are aware of the impermanence of material things and earthly existence; they stay focused on the infinity of the soul. This awareness increases happiness because it reminds one of the reliable truth of the Infinite God as distinct from the disappointing impermanence of worldly affairs.

Sikhs believe the soul is the part of God we have that is always in a God-conscious state of being. Sikhs follow a daily spiritual discipline to build inner strength and make a daily connection with the soul. This daily practice, called *sadhana*, supports the life of a spiritual human being.
The basics of a Sikh’s daily routine include the following:

- Waking up two and a half hours before sunrise
- Taking a cold shower to strengthen the nervous system and stay awake during meditation
- Brushing the hair up and covering it, with a turban or scarf
- Meditating on God’s Name, praying and praising God in the early hours of the morning
- Taking care of the body through exercise and healthy diet
- Reading the *Nitnem Banis*
- Earning an honest living and sharing with others
- Serving the congregation and community
- Remembering God upon retiring. Removing the turban and combing the hair down at night
Equality of Women

“No one is lowborn: there is only one potter, God, and He has fashioned everyone alike. His is the one light that pervades all creation.” – Guru Nanak

The equality of all people is a central tenet of Sikh Dharma. The inferiority of women was a prevalent attitude in the land and time in which the Sikh Gurus taught. A woman’s participation in a religious rite was considered polluting and it was thought that she was contaminated during menstruation and childbirth. A Hindu widow was expected to commit sati by throwing herself into the fire of her husband’s pyre, rather than bringing ill luck upon those with whom she came in contact. Muslim women were expected to cover their faces in public. Guru Nanak denounced these cultural attitudes by saying:

“It is through a woman that we are conceived and from her that we are born. It is to woman that we get engaged and then married. She is our life-long friend and the survival of our race depends upon her. On her death, a man seeks another wife. Through woman we establish our social ties. Why denounce her, the one from whom even kings are born?”

Indeed, Sikh women may perform and partake in every religious function. In the 16th c., Guru Amar Das appointed both men and women to be missionaries. He disapproved of widows remaining unmarried for the rest of their lives and forbade the practice of sati. He also condemned the Muslim practice of purdah, covering the face with a veil.
Many Sikh women are educated and work before, during, and after marriage. Women are not required to veil themselves or keep themselves separate from society. If they have taken baptism (Amrit), they also wear the same uniform as men – the 5 K’s - and many wear a turban as well.
Tolerance for Other Religions

“Whoever bathes in cold water and for three hours before dawn repeats God’s Name with love and devotion, shall receive nectar at God’s door and be blended with Him who is unborn and self-existent.” – Guru Nanak

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikh faith, said, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim.” Rather than speaking against these religions, he was rejecting religious rituals, the hypocrisies of religious leaders, and their claim to possess exclusive truth. What matters is not what religion a person practices, but rather the sincerity with which they express their devotion and love for God. Sikhs believe in One God and many paths. Today Sikhs are respectful of all religions and peoples. They do not believe in converting others to the Sikh Path.

It is a basic tenet of the Sikh religion to uphold religious freedom for all. Two of the Sikh Gurus consciously gave up their lives for this principle. For example, the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur, allowed himself to be tortured and killed because Aurangzeb, the Mughal emperor, promised that if a holy man submitted himself to this treatment, and still would not convert, then the empire would cease destroying temples and forcibly converting others to their religion.

Sikhs not only tolerate other religions, they accept and respect the truths that they teach. Guru Nanak started his missionary work traveling with a Muslim and a Hindu. Guru Arjan had a Sufi saint, Mian Mir, lay the foundation stone of the Harimandir Sahib. Guru Arjan compiled his own writings, those of the first four Gurus, and thirty-six other saints to create the Sikh sacred writings, which became the Siri Guru Granth Sahib, the Shabd Guru. He based his selection on quality. He was not concerned about the religion of the writer, but rather about the uplifting effect of the verse on the reader. Sikhs support others in the true practice of their faith so that they too may unite with God.
A Growing World Religion

“Blessed is that mortal being who shares the Teachings for the good of others.” – Guru Ram Das

In December 1968, Harbhajan Singh Khalsa Yogi, known as Yogi Bhajan, a Sikh from India, came to Los Angeles and began teaching Kundalini Yoga classes to the young people in the area. As he led the classes, he shared inspirational stories about the ten Sikh Gurus and their teachings. He incorporated phrases and passages from *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* with the yoga, encouraging musicians to put these words to tunes that they played on the guitar and translated into English. Many of the people who attended his classes had been searching for the same simple and direct means of connecting with God that Guru Nanak had conveyed so long ago.

In 1969, Yogi Bhajan started the 3HO Foundation to train teachers in Kundalini Yoga and the Dharmic lifestyle. Such was his success that in 1971 the Akal Takht in India bestowed upon him the title of Siri Singh Sahib and recognized him as the chief authority for Sikh Dharma in the Western world. In this role, he traveled throughout the world to spread the message of the Gurus and established centers in North and South America, Europe, Asia, Australia and Africa. For the first time, people of non-Indian descent made the Sikh way of life their own. Over the years, thousands of people in the West have embraced it.

The Siri Singh Sahib’s work in inspiring people toward the Sikh path has furthered cross-cultural understanding and helped to revitalize the faith. Such efforts carry on the work of Guru Nanak by bringing the universal message of service to humanity and love of the Name to all people who seek the Truth.
Holidays

“Through the Word of the Guru’s Shabd, he goes to the Lord’s Court with his banners flying proudly.” – Guru Amar Das

Since Sikh holidays are based on the lunar calendar, dates change each year. The foremost holidays celebrate the birthdays of the Sikh Gurus and other significant historical events. In addition, large centennial gatherings in recent years have honored the 500th anniversary of the birth of Guru Nanak (1969) and the 300th anniversary of the birth of the Khalsa (1999).

Guru Gobind Singh’s Birthday (Dec. or Jan.) is dedicated to the tenth and last Guru in human form who established the Khalsa in 1699. Both a warrior and a poet, his life continues to inspire Sikhs the world over. He declared that after him Siri Guru Granth Sahib would be the living Guru for all time.

Baisakhi (April 13th) commemorates the day in 1699 when Guru Gobind Singh created the Khalsa by baptizing five beloved disciples, the Panj Piare. At that time, he gave the Khalsa its unique outward form and ethical code. One of the largest Gurupurbs, Sikhs often celebrate with large, colorful processions led by five Sikhs dressed as the Panj Piare. At this time, the Nishan Sahib or Khalsa flag and flagpole covering may be ceremonially replaced.

Guru Arjan’s Martyrdom (June) remembers the torture of this gentle saint. As the fifth Guru, his accomplishments include the creation of the Golden Temple and compilation of Siri Guru Granth Sahib. He was martyred in 1606.

Guru Ram Das’ Birthday (Oct. or Nov.) honors the fourth Guru, known for his humility and healing powers. He excavated the nectar tank where his son, Guru Arjan, built the Golden Temple.
The devotees' lifestyle is unique and distinct; they follow the most difficult path…the path they take is sharper than a double-edged sword and finer than a hair's breadth.” – Guru Amar Das

There are five Sikh symbols along with the turban which constitute the uniform of the Khalsa. Collectively the symbols are known as the five K’s. They remind Sikhs of their aim to follow the ideals of the Sikh Gurus:

1. **Kesh** means uncut hair. All the Sikh Gurus encouraged their followers to leave their hair uncut. God created our hair as an integral and functional part of our bodies. The tenth Guru made it a requirement of his Khalsa as a sign of living in harmony with the will of God.

2. **Kanga** or wooden comb is a symbol of cleanliness and is used to keep the uncut hair tidy. It is easily worn under the turban and is not only practical but also keeps one’s thoughts untangled and focused on the Name of God.

3. **Kara** is a steel bracelet that reminds the Sikh that he will bow down only to God and Guru and never a man. Because it is worn on the wrist, it reminds the Sikh to do no evil with his hands.

4. **Kachhera** are the soldier’s shorts and are a symbol of chastity. Apart from the reminder to be moral, they are practical, allowing easy movement with modesty. They are worn as undergarments, but also can be worn in hot weather, for swimming or during sports.

5. **Kirpan** or sword embodies courage and self-defense. It comes from two words: kirpa and aan. Kirpa means an act of kindness and aan means honor, respect, and self-respect. On a practical level it gives the Sikh freedom

**Guru Gaddee Day (Oct. or Nov.)** marks the day in 1708 when Guru Gobind Singh placed *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* on his gaddee (throne) and declared that it would be the Guru of the Sikhs forevermore. On this day, the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* is often carried in joyful, respectful procession.

**Guru Nanak Dev’s Birthday (Oct. or Nov.)** is one of the largest holidays of the year and celebrates the birthday of the founder of the Sikh faith with stories about his life and performances of his own compositions in *Gurdwara*. In some places, Hindus and Muslims also celebrate Guru Nanak’s Birthday.

**Diwali (Oct.)** coincides with the Hindu Festival of Light and honors the release of Guru Hargobind from Gwalior Fort in 1617. The Golden Temple is festooned with thousands of lights and earthenware lamps and candles and lanterns float in the surrounding pool. Fireworks light the night sky as well.

**Guru Tegh Bahadur’s Martyrdom (Dec.)** honors the sacrifice the ninth Guru made to protect religious freedom and human rights. He was beheaded in 1675.
Death and Beyond

“To reach your true home after you die, you must conquer death while you are alive.” – Guru Nanak

Sikhs believe that in the beginning, the soul and God are one. As God is infinite and undying, so is the soul. Upon creation, the soul emerges from God to be born into physical existences or incarnations. The soul typically incarnates as the simplest life form and advances progressively to higher and higher existences. Each lifetime on earth is a school of experiences where lessons are learned. It is said that it takes 8.4 million incarnations to achieve human form; thus, the gift of life as a human is not to be wasted. Death is a process of the soul’s discarding one body in the former life for another in the next. Called the wheel of transmigration, this process is the source of suffering and pain because it is always the soul’s desire to merge with the Creator again. When a person is ready, they will meet a Guru or spiritual teacher who will lead them upon a Dharma, or path of life, that will free them from the cycle of birth and death.

The Guru teaches a person how to return to the Creator again. For Sikhs, the living Guru is now embodied in Siri Guru Granth Sahib, their sacred writings. These sacred writings flowed through the Sikh Gurus and others saints who, in a state of God-conscious ecstasy, gave the technology for reuniting with the Creator. This path or Dharma included doing good deeds, working hard, sharing with others and, above all, praising God’s Name. The sacred words contain the key for
becoming free of the wheel of cause and effect and separation, achieving a state called liberation.

When the soul leaves the body, it has two choices. It may seek another incarnation, or it may towards the brilliant white light of God. When a soul merges into the light, it is free forever; soul and God are one again. The spiritual teacher assists the soul in this journey by pushing it beyond the pull of its attachment to the earth.

Sikhs’ attitude toward death is that it is not a time of sadness because it is a chance for a person to become liberated. They play Gurbani Kirtan to remind the soul of its infinite connection. As the soul leaves the body, the first prayer of Guru Nanak is recited. All those around chant ‘Akal’, which means undying, to push the soul free of its earthly attachments and to remind those left that they must help the soul on its journey. The body is washed in yogurt and dressed in clean clothes, 5 K’s, and turban or chuni. Sikhs cremate their dead. When the soul has nothing physical to relate to, it is easier for it to leave the earthly plane. At the time of cremation, the congregation recites several traditional prayers and shares food.

As soon as possible, an Akhand Path is held so that the praises of God elevate and comfort the entire congregation. After the cremation, the congregation gathers together for a short Gurdwara service and langar. For seventeen days afterward, the nighttime prayer, Kirtan Sohila, is recited to encourage the soul to move on.
Key Dates

Guru Nanak 1469-1539
Guru Angad 1504-1552
Guru Amar Das 1479-1574
Guru Ram Das 1534-1581
Guru Arjan 1563-1606
Guru Hargobind 1595-1644
Guru Har Rai 1630-1661
Guru Harkrishan 1656-1664
Guru Tegh Bahadur 1621-1675
Guru Gobind Singh 1666-1708

Harimandir Sahib founded 1601
Adi Granth compiled 1604
Akal Takht founded 1606
Khalsa created on Baisakhi Day 1699
Siri Guru Granth Sahib declared 1708
living Guru of Sikhs

an antenna to help increase our intelligence, strength, and awareness. The hair is our crowning glory. The hair on other parts of our body helps to balance the nervous system. A man's beard helps to keep him emotionally balanced. A Sikh wears a turban in public to protect the hair and keep the mind focused. The turban serves as a spiritual crown. Wearing it, a Sikh presents him or herself as a person devoted to God's service.

A Sikh rises about two and a half hours before dawn, takes a cold shower and meditates on God's Name. Before dawn, the sun's rays strike the earth in an upward, energizing way. They help raise the consciousness of a meditator. The blessed quiet of this special time of day makes meditation easier than during the noisier times of day.

Sikhs look upon anyone other than their spouse as a parent, sibling or child. They do not have sex outside of marriage.

Sikhs live a healthy lifestyle, respecting the body as a temple for the soul. They maintain a healthy diet and many are vegetarians. Sikhs take no alcohol, tobacco, or drugs, except for medical purposes. Sikhs use God's name as their only intoxicant.

Sikhs earn their living righteously and share with others. Sikhs live in a spirit of love and kindness, always ready to help others in God's Name.
Basic Beliefs

Those who have such blessed destiny written on their foreheads, meditate on the Treasure of the Name – Guru Arjan Sikh means student of Truth; Dharma means spiritual path. Sikh Dharma means 'The spiritual path of the student of Truth.' It is a path of progressive experience. Guru Nanak founded Sikh Dharma in India more than 500 years ago. People were inspired toward a way of life that could give them the experience of God-realization. Guru means that which brings you from darkness to light. Guru Nanak taught that there is One God who lives inside of as well as beyond His creation, who generates, organizes and delivers everything in the universe. A person can elevate his consciousness by meditating on the Name of God. Sikhs often say, Sat Nam and Whahe Guru. Sat Nam means True Name. For Sikhs, the distinctive name of the Supreme Being is Whahe Guru, which means Wondrous, Indescribable Wisdom. Guru Nanak taught his followers to worship God by serving His creation. Sikh Dharma had ten consecutive founders, called Gurus. The light of Nanak was passed on through nine successors. The last human Guru was Guru Gobind Singh, who established the Siri Guru Granth Sahib as the eternal living Guru for the ages. The Siri Guru Granth Sahib is the collection of the hymns of Sikh Gurus, Hindu, Muslim and Sufi saints, sung while they were in a state of God-consciousness. Sikhs worship and bow to the Word of God in the form of these sacred writings; they do not bow to any person.

Sikh Dharma is a universal in its approach. Guru Nanak respected others' ways of worship, if done sincerely. For this reason, Sikhs respect all faiths, believing God creates many paths for His many people. A Sikh lives as God made him, believing God makes us as we are for good reasons. Therefore, a Sikh does not cut his/her hair. The hair on the head channels the sun energy into the brain, each hair 0

Demographics

Fifth largest organized world religion:
1. Christianity 2 billion
2. Islam 1.3 billion
3. Hinduism 900 million
4. Buddhism 360 million
5. Sikhism 23 million
6. Judaism 14 million
7. Baha’i 6 million
8. Shinto 4 million

19,000,000 – India
500,000 – United Kingdom
225,000 – Canada
100,000 – USA
50,000 – Malaysia
20,000 – Singapore

Resources

Macauliffe, Max, The Sikh Religion (3 vols.) S. Chand & Co., Ltd., New Delhi, 1985

Singh, Harbans ed., The Encyclopaedia of Sikhism (4 vols.), Punjabi University, Patiala, 1998


www.sikhnet.com - comprehensive Sikh website with links to many other sites.

Glossary

**Adi Granth** – Original collection of sacred writings of the first five Sikh Gurus and other Hindu, Muslim and Sufi saints, completed in 1604 by Guru Arjan

**Adi Shakti (also Khanda)** – Primal creative feminine power. Preeminent Sikh insignia formed by a combination of a chakra, a khanda, and two kirpans

**Akal** – Undying, chanted upon a person’s death to send the soul home

**Akhand Path** – Continuous reading of *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*

**Amrit** – Nectar water used as transformative medium in baptismal ceremony, Amrit Sanchar

**Amrit Dhari** – Sikh who has taken Amrit to become Khalsa

**Amrit Sanchar** – Baptismal ceremony instituted in 1699 by Guru Gobind Singh

**Amrit Vela** – Period two and a half hours before sunrise, ideal for meditation

**Anand Karaj** – Wedding ceremony

**Anand Sahib** – Song of Bliss, written by Guru Amar Das. Portions are played in Gurdwara, weddings etc.

**Ang Sang Whahe Guru** – Expression of bliss meaning, ‘In every part of my being is the ecstasy of God’s wonder.’

**Ardas** – Prayer recited before reading of Hukam

**Baisakhi** – Important holiday, held on April 13th, commemorating founding of Khalsa by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699

**Chakra** – Steel ring worn around turban. One of central elements of Adi Shakti insignia, designating infinity

**Chola** – Long shirt

**Chuni** – Sheer scarf worn by Sikh women

**Churidars** - Long pants tapered to fit snugly from knees to ankle

**Cummerbands** – Waist sash

**Das Vandh** – Tithe, one-tenth of one’s earnings

**Dharm** – Spiritual way of life, including truth, contentment, compassion, and purity, leading to union with the Infinite Creator

**Diwali** – Holiday coinciding with Hindu Festival of Light, which commemorates Guru Hargobind’s release from Gwalior Fort prison around 1617
Sacred Writings

“The Word is the Guru and the Guru is the Word and in the Word is all the nectar.” – Guru Ram Das

The founder of the Sikh faith, Guru Nanak, delivered his message to the world in the form of divine poetic song. He called this poetic song the *Shabd Guru*, the Holy Word of God, and said that it was his own Guru or teacher. He recorded his own *shabds*, or verses, in a book that he carried with him called a *pothi*. When he passed his light on to his successor, Guru Angad, he passed along the *pothi* as well. These sacred verses were transmitted in this way up to the fifth Guru, Guru Arjan, who compiled them into the *Adi Granth*, which he installed at the Golden Temple in 1604.

There was a number of blank pages left in the *Adi Granth*, which Guru Arjan said would be completed by one of his successors. Guru Gobind Singh, the tenth Guru, completed the *Shabd Guru* by adding a number of compositions of his father, the ninth Guru, Guru Tegh Bahadur. Known as the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, it is the only version compiled by the Gurus in their own words, and is recognized by all Sikhs as the pathway to God.

Just before his death in 1708, Guru Gobind Singh invested the Guruship upon the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*. He said that there would be no more human Gurus after him and that it would be the living Guru of the Sikhs for all time. The *Shabd Guru* is treated with the same respect that would be shown to a Guru in human form.

These *shabds* were created to elevate the consciousness of those who sing and recite them, and it is through singing them that their true power is conveyed. The *Shabd Guru* is arranged in thirty-one sections according to the *raag* (traditional Indian melody) in which they are to be sung.

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**Five K’s** – Five articles of dress which identify wearer as Khalsa. Originally given by Guru Gobind Singh during Baisakhi ceremony in 1699

- **Kachchera** – Loose under shorts
- **Kanga** – Wooden comb
- **Kara** – Steel bracelet
- **Kesh** – Uncut hair
- **Kirpan** – Curved dagger

**Gaddee** - Throne

**Granthi** – One who attends the Guru

**Gurdwara** – Gate of the Guru, sanctified place where *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* is installed. Also Sikh worship service

**Gurmukhi** – The alphabet, from the mouth of the Guru, developed by Guru Angad so that writings of Sikh Gurus would be pronounced correctly

**Guru** – One who takes you from darkness to light. Title applied to Nanak and nine successors. Common term for *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*

**Guru ka Langar** – Community meal prayerfully prepared

**Gurupurb** – Sikh holiday

**Harimandir Sahib** – Temple of God, commonly called Golden Temple, holiest sanctuary of the Sikhs. Founded in 1601 by Guru Arjan in Amritsar, India

**Hukam** – Divine Will of God. In Gurdwara ceremony, a passage taken at random from *Siri Guru Granth Granth* and read out loud to congregation

**Ik Onkar** – There is One Creative Creation. First phrase and essence of *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*. Common Sikh symbol

**Khalsa** – Pure one. Baptized Sikh, one who has taken Amrit

**Khanda** – Double-edged sword, part of Adi Shakti insignia. Used to stir Amrit in ceremony of Amrit Sanchar

**Khathaa** – Exposition given in Gurdwara

**Kirtan** (also *Gurbani Kirtan*) – Singing of the sacred hymns of the *Guru*

**Kirtan Sohila** – Nighttime prayer, done before bed and cremation
Kurta pajamas – Men’s loose, long shirt and pants
Nam Simran – Meditation on the Name of God
Nishan Sahib – Sikh flag, with Adi Shakti symbol
Nishkaam Seva – Selfless service
Nitinem Banis – Daily prayers
Panj Piare – Five Beloved Ones. The original members of the Khalsa baptized by Guru Gobind Singh at Baisakhi ceremony in 1699
Patka – Topknot style turban worn by boys
Pothi – Traveling composition book, carried by Guru Nanak. Became basis for *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*
Prashaad – Favor or gift, in the form of a sweet pudding given to congregants after a Gurdwara service
Purdah – Muslim tradition of face veil for women
Raag – Classical Indian musical measure
Ragi – Musician who plays compositions in raag
Rishi knot – Long hair twisted and knotted on top of head
Sadh Sangat – Company of the Holy, divine congregation engaged in praising God’s Name and serving humanity
Sadhana – Discipline, for Sikhs the practice of rising early, meditating and praising God’s Name
Salvar kameez – Women’s knee-length dress and loose pants
Sant-sipahi – Saint-soldier
Sat Nam – Truth is Your Identity
Sati – Hindu tradition of widows being consumed in fire on funeral pyre with dead husband
Shabd – (also *Gurshabd*) – Sacred hymn of the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*
Shabd Guru – Word of God, articulated through the instrument of the Guru
Sikh – Student, disciple. Originally the disciples of Guru Nanak and his nine successors. One who professes the Sikh religion, believes in *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, the Ten Gurus, and has no other religion
Sikh Dharma – Spiritual way of life based upon teachings of Ten Sikh Gurus and *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*
Siri Guru Granth Sahib – The living Guru of the Sikhs. A universal technology for transforming consciousness tied to the
Word as articulated by the Sikh Gurus and other God-conscious Muslim, Hindu, and Sufi saints


**Turban** – A long piece of cloth wrapped around the head. Traditional article of dress for devout Sikhs. A crown of consciousness

**Whahe Guru** – Wondrous, Indescribable Wisdom. Name of the Supreme Being