

## Khalsa is Born in the West

*Contributed*

### Opening the Guru's Door:

The vision that brought Yogi Bhajan to the West was a deep faith that the Sikh technology was a vital key to the future of humanity. For the most part, people were not looking for a new religion when they came to his Kundalini yoga classes. But as their lives began to change and their hearts and minds were opened, they yearned to experience spiritual nature of life. Yogi Bhajan told many captivating stories about the Sikh Gurus and the tests and challenges they championed through courage and faith. His students were drawn to the graceful, powerful, and dignified lifestyle of the Sikhs.

"[Yogi Bhajan] is the first glorious son of Guru Gobind Singh who approached these western youth. He met them, cared for them, loved them, and brought them to the feet of his Guru. He instructed them in the fundamentals of the Sikh faith and bade them to earn their living by honest labour, to meditate on God's Name, and to share their earnings with the needy and poor. Through his soul-stirring lectures, they were awakened into a new life. And it is Guru's wonder that he transformed them from hippies to yoga students, and from yoga Students to Sikhs and from Sikhs to Khalsa."6 In the manner of the Sikh tradition, Yogi Bhajan taught his students to rise early to meditate each day, a practice known as *sadbana*. Although the word *sadhana* simply means "spiritual practice," for a Sikh it begins by rising at 3:00 AM and taking a very cold shower. In the chilly predawn hours, people came to Guru Ram Das Ashram warmly wrapped in their meditation blankets, carrying their mats to sit on. With a deep sincerity and a lightness of soul, they came together to chant according to the Sikh teachings:

*Gur sat gur kaa jo sikh akhaae, So bhalake uth Harnaam dhiaavai Udam  
kare bhalake parbhaatee, Ishnaan kare Amritsar naavai upades Guru Har  
Har jap jaapai, Sabh kilavikh paap dokh leh jaavai Fi. cbarai divas  
gurbaanee gaavai, Behediaa uthadiaa Harnam*

*..' dhiaavai*

*One who calls himself a Sikh of the True Guru shall rise in the early morning hours and meditate on God's Name. Upon arising, he is to bathe and cleanse himself in the Nectar Tank. Following the instructions of the Guru, he is to chant the Name of the Lord. All sins, misdeeds, and negativity shall be erased. Then, at the rising of the sun, he is to sing Gurbani, whether sitting or standing, he is to meditate on God's Name.*

[Guru Ram Das Ji : SGGS: 305]

In every class and lecture, Yogi Bhajan emphasized the importance of a daily morning sadhana. "Somebody asked me what sadhana does. I said, 'Nothing.' He said, 'Well, it must be doing something. You all the time say, 'sadhana, sadhana, sadhana.' I said, 'Sadhana is nothing but where a disciplined one, the love or lover talks to the One.' Sadhana is where you clean your own mind. Sadhana is where one prepares for the day to become kind and compassionate for everyone, including your enemies. Desperation, depression, and a feeling of destitution come only to those who have no discipline or sadhana. A house which is not cleaned looks dirty, and the mind which is not cleansed. stinks as well. Sadhana is self-cleaning. When you want to be blissful and

bountiful, you have to have a clear mind, a mind through which your spirit and your soul can shine."

For many of these young people, there was a subliminal familiarity with the Sikh traditions and life style. For the people who had been drawn to Yogi Bhajan and the Sikh teachings, there was often a feeling of "coming home," a deep sense of "remembering," and they began to come together to live as a community of spiritual people. Some people came, benefited from the yoga classes, and moved on to other aspects of their life, bringing with them the lessons learned from the Sikh technology. All were welcomed in whatever large or small way they chose to participate, and "Sat Nam" could be heard echoing up and down Melrose Avenue.

On Sunday nights, students would stay after yoga class to share music, food, and the company of each other. People played guitars and sang, composing many beautiful songs about God and their awakening to a spiritual life. The music served to bond and uplift the fledgling Sikhs, and they poured their hearts out into these devotional songs. In a world with too many questions and not enough answers Sunday night kirtan was a chance to relax with kindred souls and rejoice with people of high spirits and reverent idealism. For many people, it was the high point of their week.

One day some of his students brought to class a song written by a rock and roll group, The Incredible String Band. It was a simple tune of love and innocence that captured the joy of the times. Yogi Bhajan ended every class with this song, as he still does today: *"May the long time sun shine upon you, all love surround you, and the pure light within you, guide your way on."*

Music was the primary channel of expression for the 3HO students, for words alone could not convey the passion and excitement they felt during this time of personal growth and transformation. Even at this early juncture, Yogi Bhajan knew that they were the beginning of a strong Khalsa Nation and, as with the Sikhs of Guru Nanak's time, music would play an essential role. He wholeheartedly encouraged and participated in the composition of these inspiring songs. He often said, "God respects me when I work, but he loves me when I sing!"

The bond of spiritual identity grew strong between Yogi Bhajan and his students. As was natural, they developed a sincere dedication to this man who had come to play such an important role in their lives. Continuously, Yogi Bhajan said, "Don't love me, because this is not of my doing. It is all the miracle of *Guru Ram Das*, so love Him from whom this wisdom flows. I am just a postman delivering the message to you, and you in turn should share it with others."

He taught them that a Sikh would bow to no man, and that they should worship only the One Creator of all. He made it very clear to the many students who came to learn from him that he was not, and could not be, their guru. He had come to America to bring the message of Guru Nanak and to share with the people of the West the freedom and joy of coming to the feet of *Guru Ram Das*.

When this question was posed to him by a student, his reply was consistent and clear: "I am a man. I cannot be your guru, and I do not want the guru-trip. It doesn't suit me. My relationship with you is very simple. I feel that God has blessed me to have some knowledge, and if I can share with my brothers and sisters in faith, and they can enjoy the same ecstasy of consciousness, then we all can enjoy the same joy. I have mopped the floor of the Golden Temple, and I have found the richest riches in my soul. That is

why I say, 'Love a man of God and be a man of God, but only worship the One God.' You shall not bow to anyone other than God, even if you are cut limb by limb, because no man can be a slave to another man. I am no one's guru. I am just a useless pipe, but a good plumber picked me up, and now I quench the thirst of those whose souls are thirsty. I say, 'Hail! Hail! Hail to Guru Ram Das, who picked up this meanest of the men and made him a very meaningful person.'

### **Developing a Spiritual Identity:**

In a little over one year's time, the unrestrained nature of the young people who were coming to yoga classes was beginning to refine into the purity of Khalsa. One of the first things Yogi Bhajan taught his students was to dress all in white as an outward symbol and inner reminder of the purity and consciousness to which they aspired. He taught that wearing white expands the aura, giving the student greater strength in his personal electromagnetic field.

"You are not just this body. Your energy is in your aura and your aura extends nine feet from your skin. There are two things which can increase the size of the aura: white clothes and cotton cloth. When you wear white, cotton clothing from top to bottom, you can increase your aura up to three times. This is under all circumstances, even if you are at your lowest ebb. That's the law of the universe."

9

Wearing white clothes made each person very conscious of their actions and movements in order to stay clean throughout the day. It also served an important role in creating a sense of identity and unity among the students of Guru Ram Das Ashram.

Slowly, all that wild, long hair became combed and clean, and students started wearing turbans as their Sikh brothers did in India. For both men and women, the beautiful, white turban was a bold declaration of spiritual values and identity.

As part of the transformation these young people were undergoing, many took on spiritual names, leaving their birth names and confirming their new spiritual identity. By taking last name "Singh" or "Kaur" they committed themselves to walking the path of Guru Nanak, as "seekers of Truth."

"A rose by any other name would smell as sweet,' or would it? We know the name of a thing is not the thing itself, but the vibration of the name, if it is based on higher awareness, can put you in tune with the thing itself. By the grace of God, Yogi Bhajan has seen 'fit to bestow upon many of us new names, spiritual names-names that establish a vibration for us to grow into, to expand into, to relate to in consciousness and in being. Never before in the history of America have there been so many 'Singhs' and 'Kaur's' and we are experiencing the psychological and emotional changes that new names stimulate, not only in ourselves but in others. With a new name, we are no longer limited and forced to counteract the vibrations of preconceived ideas about us in other people's minds which are always summoned up by the repetition of the old name. A new name is a new birth."

10

### **The Grace of God Movement of America:**

As Yogi Bhajan continued to deal with the problems of the western culture, he was deeply disturbed by the situation of women in American society. In such a technologically advanced country, he was appalled that women were used and abused as sex symbols. He knew that when women are denied dignity, grace, and their rightful status in society, generation after generation of children will suffer. He taught, "When a

man falls, an individual falls. But when a woman falls, an entire generation is lost".

On September 22, 1970, in San Francisco, he began a campaign for the upliftment of the women of the Western world. He told them, "You are the grace of the individual, you are the grace of the town, you are the grace of the nation, you are the grace of the world. The world starts with you, and it ends with you. Therefore, you should never be cheap. When you cannot handle what you are, you become cheap. The crown of grace, divinity, and dignity should be on your head, and it should not create a headache for you. Therefore, you have to be trained. You have to train your emotions, you have to train yourself, and you have to go one way. There is one way to One God for a woman: selfless, dignified, and graceful behavior. Dignity and divinity are your birthright."

He taught a special mediation to the women that established and confirmed their grace and radiance. With a relaxed and meditative mind, they chanted, "I am the Grace of God." That night The Grace of God Movement was born, and it became the strength and dignity of an entire generation of women. With candles in hand, his students marched in procession through Northbeach, the red-light district of San Francisco, past the nude bars and the porno theaters, chanting "We are the Grace of God." The city, with its nightlife in full swing, looked on in wonder and amazement.

"I am not doing anything new in this country; after all, you do celebrate Mother's Day. I am just telling women that 'You are the Grace of God.' All I am trying to do is remind the mother of her responsibilities and telling the men that they are born of the woman. If there is no respect for the woman, there shall be no peace on this earth. This is what I believe, I will stand by it, and this is what I am going to preach.

"I have seen through your lifestyle. How can a man, born out of a woman, become so shameless that he allows women to give service in a restaurant totally naked? How can that happen in such a civilized country? Well, that exists and I know it does. The signs are advertising it just two blocks from where I live. This big hypocrisy in which you and I are participating is very evident. But there is a method to face this untruth, and I am adopting this method: to raise the consciousness of the people, to make them aware, and to make them realize the Truth in mankind."

11

#### **Coming to the Guru's Feet:**

On Baisakhi Day, 1970, two young students decided they wanted to "officially" become Sikhs and requested that Yogi initiate them. At that time and many times since, he has replied, "My birth and my life and my end are meant to serve, to console, to inspire, to share the sufferings and to take the suffering, and that is my happiness. I firmly, honestly and truthfully feel that I am much, much, and very much lower than the dust under the feet of those who have uttered 'Sat Nam' once, and that too by mistake. You remember when I came to the United States? Up to this day, I have not initiated any single person. How can I initiate any man into a spiritual way 'of life when he himself is born out of the Infinite Soul?"

12

Yogi Bhajan instructed these young men to go to the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*, who is the only Guru of any Sikh. Since the young American Sikhs did not yet have the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* available to them, they went to the Sikh Study Circle of Los Angeles, a prominent Sikh Gurdwara in the area. Charged with spiritual energy and vision, they presented themselves before the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib* dressed in white and with beautiful white turbans. When they announced their intentions to the sangat, the

Gurdwara management did not know what to do with them! They had never seen someone who was not of Indian origin wanting to become a Sikh. One of them phoned Guru Ram Das Ashram to ask Yogi Bhajan what he thought they should do. He advised them that all they had to do was give these young men to the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*. That was all.

A simple ceremony was improvised on the spot. Two men from the congregation offered their own karas so that the new Sikhs could have them to wear. These two young men with sparkling eyes and pure hearts were presented by the Gurdwara President to the sangat. In the weeks that followed, many more yoga students took Sikh vows. For the first time in history, people of the western world were adopting the form and teachings of the Sikh Gurus, bowing their head to the *Siri Guru Granth Sahib*.

In Los Angeles, Yogi Bhajan's students began attending Sunday morning Gurdwara services at the Sikh Study Circle with him. Because of their love of devotional music, several students learned to sing Gurbani Kirtan. Even though Gurmukhi script was difficult for the American Sikhs to learn, they were longing to understand the prayers and mantras they were reciting daily. Taking translations of the Sikh daily prayers, Sardarni Premka Kaur was absorbed for weeks writing them in poetic verse that could be easily understood, by western Sikhs. The resulting book, *Peace Lagoon*, contained translations of the daily prayers of the Sikhs, known as the *banis*, as well as 'selections from the *Sukhmani Sahib*, the *Lavan* - the wedding prayer of the Sikhs, and the *Sidha Gosht* of Guru Nanak. In the summer of 1971, *Peace Lagoon* was published by the Brotherhood of Life Bookstore in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It is still today the primary translation used by people new to the Sikh faith in the West.

