

Spiritual Perspective in the New Year

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New Year is the time when greeting cards, gifts, and good wishes keep pouring in from friends and relatives. They are believed to be expressing sentiments but with a lot of money exchanging hands. The expression of sentiments is wrapped in expensive packages and psychological hang-ups.

In America nearly two hundred billion dollars are spent on gifts every year. That comes to over a thousand dollars spent on gifts by every American and this is repeated every year. And this does not take into account the amount of time spent in shopping for the gifts along with the intense anxiety and stress that goes with the gift hunting.

Is there an alternative to expense and stress?

The economists are suggesting us to consider abandoning the pretense and simply exchanging piles of money in the form of coins, currency, or gift cards. I am not sure that it is a real solution.

Then, is there a solution in the realm of spirituality to get us out of this stressful rut we go through every year? Or, are there gifts that soothe and heal rather than produce waste and cause anxiety? Let us explore.

There may be many motives underlying the culture of giving yearly gifts. The one coming to mind first is often to remind us of time of the year and passing of our chronological age. Birthdays and yearly occurring holidays for most people are nothing but occasions to highlight their age and wrinkles.

As an alternative to present day gifts, then we may consider launching a culture of gratitude, that is, appreciation of the spiritual nature of each individual's assets, and highlight gifts that are continuously being bestowed upon us by the life itself. Certainly, we Sikhs consider life as a divine gift and most precious of all gifts.

There can be so much written on the gifts that they compel me to think that there may be as many reasons for our thankfulness. But let me limit here to the gift of many birthdays we are allowed to experience; birthdays which the western cultures most exploit as occasions of gift exchanges. Our gift should then be expression of gratitude for the gift of life.

While reading about birthdays and the ageing process (*avadhi*) in *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* I realized that at the time of any New Year, or a birthday, when our circle of friends and relatives celebrate and express jubilation, we lose another year from the God given life span. This loss is hugely significant for many of us, with a head of greying hair and an unsteady nervous system.

As we grow older and amass more wealth than wisdom we proportionately give up opportunity to enjoy those treasures. Bhagat Kabir, while writing in the *Guru Granth* (page 91) brings home this lesson as follows.

ਜਨਨੀ ਜਾਨਤ ਸੁਤੁ ਬਡਾ ਹੋਤੁ ਹੈ ਇਤਨਾ

ਕੁ ਨ ਜਾਨੈ ਜਿ ਦਿਨ ਦਿਨ ਅਵਧ ਘਟਤੁ ਹੈ ॥ [SGGS: 91]

Every mother celebrates and takes pleasure in believing that her child is growing up with every birthday she celebrates; she does not realize that, day by day, her son's or daughter's life is actually diminishing by a year per birthday.

Guru Arjun brings this point home with another perspective on page 207 of the Guru Granth.

ਰਾਜੁ ਜੋਬਨੁ ਅਵਧ ਜੋ ਦੀਸੈ ਸਭੁ ਕਿਛੁ ਜੁਗ ਮਹਿ ਘਾਟਿਆ ॥ [SGGS: 207]

Power and authority, youth and possessions - whatever is seen in this world, all of them are continuously fading away.

Guru Arjun further describes (SGGS: 247) the plight of our shortsightedness in counting our growing wealth and influence as something ever-increasing:

ਹਉ ਸੋਚਉ ਹਉ ਖਾਟਤਾ ਸਗਲੀ ਅਵਧ ਬਿਹਾਨੀ ॥ [SGGS: 242]

I think that I am earning profits and getting richer with advancing age, without realizing that my life span is declining in similar proportions.

Then, should the New Year (or a birthday) be an occasion for euphoria or introspection? The answer is neither yes nor no. The answer may be qualified based on what aspect of our growth and our life span we look at.

Considerable research, based on the foundational assumption of a finite human life span, has begun to focus on the concept of life span independent of yearly calendars of events. It may be called life expectancy that is spiritually rich and free of dependence on a calendar. It is rather a healthy life expectancy, an active life expectancy, a disability-free life expectancy, an altruistic life span, a functional life expectancy, and a purposeful life expectancy. A life that is gift to enjoy and that is opportunity to fulfil its fundamental objectives.

The yearly thanksgiving should inculcate appreciation of the years that are gifted to us as the number of years that we can expect to live in reasonably good health, with none or only minor disabling health conditions, and with ability to wisely use the time and resources available. That number may or may not decline with New Year or a new birthday depending on how one lives one's life.

Guru Amar Das argues [SGGS: 1418] that pious people oriented towards Divine wisdom in fact do not experience the ageing process as others do:

ਗੁਰਮੁਖਿ ਬੁਢੇ ਕਦੇ ਨਾਹੀ ਜਿਨਾ ਅੰਤਰਿ ਸੁਰਤਿ ਗਿਆਨੁ ॥ [SGGS: 1418]

Divinely oriented people heeding the wisdom of Guru Granth never become old or senile; within them resides the ever youthful intuitive understanding and spiritual wisdom.

Then the faith people like Sikhs may continue to celebrate the premise that they will continue to experience divine presence and divine *hukam* (defined as the sacred blue prints of life drawn by Infinite Wisdom). Year after year they may go on with sharing the bliss of creativity endowed upon them through the Infinite (*vahe*) Wisdom (*guru*). Then the life and the years will be worth living and worth celebrating.

The New Year introspection may lead us to a solemn declaration that we will endeavor further to building inner bridges to reality so that we may empower our own potential as well as promote others to shift the global mind towards eternal reality.

