

BSCF 16th VAISAKHI AT WESTMINSTER SPEECH 2023, TUESDAY 25 APRIL 2023

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Dear brothers and sisters, Waheguru ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru ji ki Fateh. A very happy 324th Vaisakhi to you all. May God, the All-embracing, Almighty Creator, bless us all.

Satgur ki sewa safal hai je ko kare chith lai

Fruitful is service to the True Guru, If it is practised with a sincere and dedicated mind.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 552

Sewa karat hoi nehkami, tis ko hoth prapat suami

That person who selflessly serves, without thought of reward,

Such a person finds God, the servants True Master.

Sri Guru Granth Sahib, ang 286.

Ik Oankar: God is one, and all is God. So begins the root of all Sikh teaching. When we perceive the Creator in creation, then service to creation becomes service to God. We serve, not to change anyone or to seek any reward, but because of a spirit of love and sacrifice for all creation, in which the Divine light infinitely dwells. With these thoughts in mind, allow me to reflect on the role of *sewa*, or selfless service, as an integral part of daily spiritual practice.

Following a profound experience of communion with God, Guru Nanak, our first Guru, was given his Divine assignment to help the suffering humanity and provide a path of salvation. In a spirit of compassion for a suffering world, he travelled vast distances.

Meeting diverse people, Guru Nanak provided a new vision for finding joy, purpose and happiness based around daily practices for personal and collective spiritual growth. They included: *Naam japna* – remembering Naam, the energy and power of God's real and infinite presence; *kirat karni* – industrious, ethical and accountable living; *vand chhakna*, selfless sharing. Likewise, there was *kirtan* (singing God's praises to daily reflect on spiritual wisdom) and *sewa* (service of others).

Each practice was rooted in the message of *Ik Oankar*, that calls on us to see the presence of the Master Creator as being latent in an interconnected and interdependent creation, where, in a Divine sense, 'all is God'.

Unceasing reverence for the Creator is expressed through the mind, heart and hands that serve. From this foundation, the interrelated principles of equality, humility, integrity, service and love began to define the Sikh Dharam or faith. Sikhs are life-long learners. Nine successive Gurus establishing entities and institutions that further shaped Guru Nanak's legacy.

From the start, the langar, where food is served equally to all, was established as an essential feature of all Sikh centres. Here, the food of wisdom was also shared through scriptural teachings. This led to the compilation of a unique scripture, that included the wisdom of 36 exalted human contributors (6 Sikh Gurus, 15 saints, 11 Brahmin Bhattas and four Sikh disciples). In 1699, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, initiated the Khalsa Panth.

After exalting the community of disciples, he exalted the scripture, commanding all Sikhs to revere Guru Granth Sahib Ji as the eternal Guru. As per his teaching - '*Saach kahou sun leho sabay, jin prem kio tin he prabh payo*' – the exercise of limitless love in action thus defines *sewa* or service.

The spiritual path is a 'game of love' – '*Jo tou prem khelan ka chao*' - a love that is pure and unconditional, that demands boundless sacrifice. The wise know that love endures, conquers, and wins. The power of love is immense.

Sikhs are taught that, to fulfil life's goal and merge with God - even in the midst of this life, we must learn to live with love, day in and day out, by realising our interconnectedness and interdependence. Such a loving mindset produces everlasting joy, providing spiritual, mental and emotional liberation. By nurturing this mindset, any selfless volunteering becomes more than a transaction or act of charity, where remembrance of the Creator never ceases. It follows the teaching, '*Akha jeeva, visray mar jao*' - to connect with God, is to truly live; to disconnect is to die - for then we become spiritually lifeless. Volunteering is therefore a spiritual practice and a natural expression of love. The spark of God that makes us spiritually alive, is the source of all Divine attributes and spiritual capital in a human being, who may otherwise be dominated by the ego. Values and virtues thus shape how a Sikh is to act, behave and react. The Sikh Dharam can be described as a path of virtuous living and righteous conduct. The Sikh Dharam also involves fighting injustice unapologetically. By seeing God in all, this search for justice is rooted in compassion and care for all – for society and for nature.

The Covid-19 pandemic affected our emotional and physical health. It affected our spirits too, by reminding us of our interconnectedness and interdependence. People stepped forward to volunteer and serve their communities, displaying great acts of kindness and sacrifices, with sincerity of heart. Nurses and physicians came out of retirement to serve understaffed and overwhelmed hospitals, community groups raised funds to buy oxygen, food and supplies, religious communities prepared and delivered meals. Such sensitive approaches remind us that, in the Sikh ethos, volunteering is based on fostering an authentic connection with those we seek to serve, without any agenda for personal gain. Serving langar, at its core, is a love-inspired service.

Sewa is an intrinsic part of our role on the planet. In Jap Ji Sahib, our first morning prayer, Guru Nanak likens the *dharti*, or earth, to a *dharamsal*, a place we visit to practice *dharam*. In the concluding verse, we realise this *dharamsal* is a *taksal* – a workshop, the scene for an awesome labour of love. With dedicated attention, we have a chance to apply wisdom and virtues to realise the golden potential of human life. Like the goldsmith in this verse, we have come here to do our *kirat* – working to harness to the upmost our God-given skills and abilities to improve ourselves and the communities and environments around us. When values and virtues begin to enrich our spirit and uplift God's wider creation, we start to generate true '*kamai*' or earnings, the only riches our soul may then depart with.

There is indeed something liberating about harnessing this inner divine strength. May sewa, or selfless volunteering, inspire each generation to discover it, in the service of '*sarbat da bhalla*', the wellbeing and flourishing of all.

Thank you
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