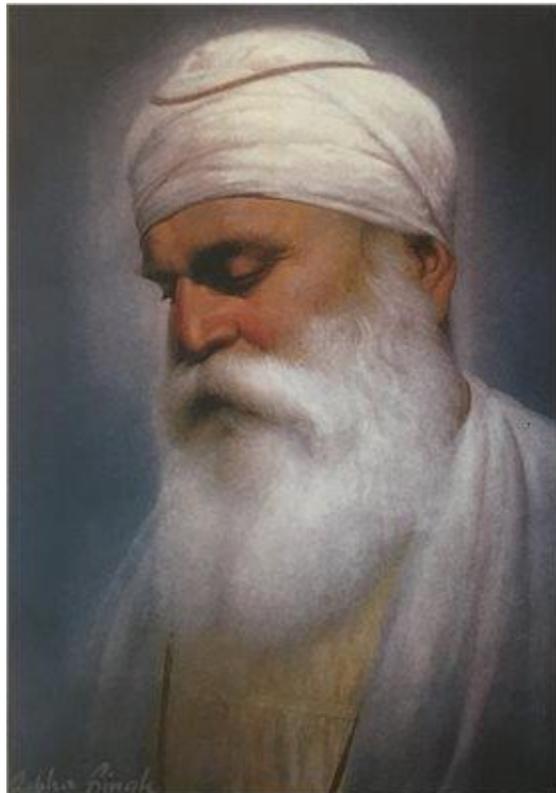


# The Life and Mission of Guru Nanak

by: Giovanni Vines

In the year 1469, a divine meteorite struck northwestern India, about 40 miles outside of Lahore (now a part of Pakistan). They named this heavenly flame, Nanak. The shock waves from Nanak's visit to this world resounded from the lofty heights of Tibet to the jungles of Sri Lanka, from the lowlands of Burma across and beyond the Hindu Kush to Mecca, Baghdad, and Jerusalem. Even today, the aftershock of Nanak's earthly mission still resounds in every corner of this planet. Few outside of India today realize the impact that he had on humanity, and is still having, and will continue to have for centuries to come.



Guru Nanak was born to fulfill a unique and noble purpose; to bridge the divide between people of different faiths, and to inspire common people to seek God-realization. The life of Guru Nanak is

recorded in a narrative called Puratan Janamsakhi, which historians consider to be the most reliable source of biographical information. While the account is somewhat brief, leaving out large segments of his life while he was engaged in his famous travels, it does provide a revealing picture of the man-teacher-saint.

At the time of his birth, and throughout his life, the Moguls were securing power throughout Northern India, and would eventually rule a vast empire which would endure for 330 years. Islamic kingdoms had been in place in Northern India for some time, but with the Moguls came an increasing dominance of Islam and seeds of conflict with people of other faiths, such as Buddhists and Jains, but especially Hindus who were the majority. The official position on religion for most of the Mogul rulers was one of tolerance, but it was the Muslim clerics and administrators who used their positions of authority to make life difficult for Hindus. With the Moguls in power, Islam had the upper hand and the animosity between Hindus and Muslims deepened and widened. It was in the midst of these circumstances that Nanak appeared.

Nanak's father was the village accountant, an important position, appropriate to his merchant (Bedi) caste and social status. The village elder assured the young boy and his father that when it came time for his father to retire from active service, the job would go to Nanak. The tradition of a job or trade being passed on from father to son is a time-honored mainstay of Indian culture. Educational opportunities were scarce in his rural village, but he was tutored in Persian and Hindi as a preparation for his career.

While his father groomed him to be a merchant, Nanak developed his own interests. From a very early age, he investigated the subject of religion with anyone he could find who seemed to have any insight into the subject, or any theological literature. As he got older, he sought out ascetics, sages, and yogis and centers of religious learning, and as a result, gained a sound footing in scriptural literature and

theology. His family had him married as a teenager and arranged for various village jobs, such as herding buffalo, shop keeping, and trading in horses, trying to pave the way for their son's inevitable life as a householder. But Nanak preferred the company of his religious and ascetic friends and performed poorly at the jobs his father arranged for him.

Running out of favors in his local village, Nanak's father made arrangements for him to apprentice as a merchant in a nearby town, Chuharkhana. He bankrolled his son with enough money to secure living accommodations and to set himself up in business. But along the route, Nanak met some ascetics and holy men and gave all of his money to them. Upon return, his family was bewildered. Nanak, they concluded, had gone mad. His father even called in a physician to examine him. Nanak tried to explain that he was smitten with pangs of love for the Lord, and suffered simply from God-intoxication.

*“Some take me as one under an evil spell*

*Others say that I am ‘out of tune’,*

*Some call me a man forsaken and woebegone;*

*But I am mad after my Lord*

*And yearn for none but Him.”*

Maru, M.1

Eventually his brother-in-law, Jai Ram, intervened and offered to take Nanak with him to Sultanpur, where he set him up with a merchant's position. Nanak carried out his duties during the day to the best of his abilities, but when night came, he engaged in meditation.

It was at Sultanpur that Nanak's fate would forever change. One morning, while bathing in the Kali Bein, a stream near town, he wandered off into the forest. His family and friends wondered what had happened to him. Did he drown? Three days later he emerged from the forest with a blissful radiance about him muttering, "There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim". Everywhere he went, Nanak chanted the phrase. People really did begin to believe that he had gone mad.

Nanak's equating Hindus with Muslims offended many people. On one occasion, a formal complaint was filed against him, and he was brought before the governor, where a local Qazi (priest) presented the complaint. The governor could see that Nanak was God-intoxicated and offered him a seat next to his. He explained to the Qazi that Nanak was a faqir and that his words were easily misunderstood. The hearing recessed for afternoon prayers and Nanak accompanied the Qazi, who conducted the prayer. Nanak did not kneel, as is customary, but instead remained standing.

Upon return to the hearing, the Qazi used Nanak's behavior at prayers as further evidence against him. When the governor asked Nanak to explain, he replied that the Qazi had also not prayed. Yes, he kneeled down, but at no time did he have his mind on God. Instead, the Qazi was thinking the entire time about his new foal that was loose back home, worried that the foal might fall into a nearby well. The Qazi was ashamed. He apologized to Nanak and to the governor and withdrew the complaint.

Sometime around 1497, Guru Nanak left Sultanpur and began his journeys. This period would occupy the next 25 years of his life. He began with a small troupe, including his good friends Mardana, a Muslim, and Bhai Bala, a Hindu, but the numbers would soon swell. He took four main journeys and one minor one. His longest one, which may have spanned as long as twelve years, took him as far as Egypt and the Middle East, all the way to Jerusalem and Turkey. To the north, Nanak crossed the snow-capped Himalayas where he met the Tibetans and Chinese, and gave light to the Naths, the Siddhas, and the Lamas. To the east, he crossed the North Indian plains as far as Bengal. And to the south, he

traversed the subcontinent as far as Sri Lanka. He traveled not for the purpose of reaching a particular place, but rather in search of the hearts of sincere seekers, wherever he might find them.

Nanak was a reformer, always challenging the old ways and methods. He saw that people everywhere were just going through the motions of their religious observances. He sought to inspire them to really want to know God, while always careful to seek a point of equilibrium with them and their traditional faiths. Underlying his efforts was a vision for people adopting a completely new and practical means of seeking and realizing God through the practice of the Word.

When Nanak visited Hardwar, he observed the pilgrims at the river throwing water toward the east, which is a customary way of relieving the burdens of the departed ancestors. Nanak waded in and began throwing water toward the west. When the people asked him why he was throwing water to the west, he replied that he was watering his fields in Lahore. They asked how such a thing was possible, to which he replied, that if these waters could reach the heavens, then surely, they could reach Lahore which was much closer by comparison. He was at all times focused on his mission of weaning people away from their archaic, ritualistic observances.

Given the political turmoil of the time, anyone sincerely seeking spirituality usually became an ascetic and left the towns and villages behind to live a life of self-abnegation and rigid disciplines in the mountains, forests, and jungles. Nanak was concerned to see these sincere souls driven away from mainstream society. He wanted the quest for spiritual awakening to be integrated in to the fabric of everyday life for all people, regardless of their style of living or stature in society.

When visiting Gorakhmata, Nanak met with a group of yogis who immediately took to him and asked him to join their order. Nanak answered with the following hymn;

*“Yoga lies not in the yogi’s patched garments,  
Not in his ash smeared body, nor walking staff.*

*Yoga lies not in large earrings, shaved heads,  
Nor in the blowing of the conch.  
One who lives in the world, uncontaminated,  
Has found the secret of yoga.  
Religion lies not in empty words.  
One who takes all men as his equal is religious.  
Religion lies not in pilgrimages,  
Not in postures of contemplation,  
Religion lies not in places of bathing  
Nor roaming about begging.  
One who lives in the world, uncontaminated  
Has found the secret of Religion.”*

Nanak was a masterful teacher. From the very beginning, he had a clear vision of his goals and the means by which he would realize them, which were well-planned and calculated. When he prepared his visit to a city or village, he would intentionally visit places of religious study, sites of pilgrimage, shrines and holy places, and religious festivals. Nanak and his evangelical troupe amounted to a traveling minstrel show. They would find a strategic spot and begin singing and playing their instruments and people would gather around. Then he would stop in the middle of a verse and expound on the deeper, esoteric meaning. He was also a prolific writer. The collection of Nanak's hymns that have been preserved and which are contained within the Adi Granth numbers 974.

Nanak had a flair for the dramatic. He often carried a staff in one hand and a collection of hymns in the other. He wore costumes which were carefully designed for each journey to convey the precise image that he wanted people to see. Sometimes his dress would incorporate elements of Hindu and Muslim attire. At other times, they would be carefully planned without any possible inference to either.

In general, he dressed the way he thought best for each situation in order to facilitate his communication and integration with the local people.

When he visited Multan, the land of faqirs and holy men, he was greeted at a village gate with a bowl brimming over with milk, meaning that the place was already awash with saintly men and there was no room for another. Nanak placed a jasmine flower on top of the milk and had the bowl returned. His reply meant that he would float above the fray giving sweet fragrance to all.

The love of God and service to man was at the core of Nanak's message. He bore witness to the glory of one God, one brotherhood, and the principles of human fellowship and universal love. He came to reconcile all religions and all faiths, with a reverence for all past saints and masters. He proclaimed the harmony inherent in all the scriptures of the world by announcing a singular truth within all the great traditions; that the same flame of love shone in all of the churches, temples, shrines, and sacraments of man. He was the manifested heart of religion.

When the Mogul ruler Babar met Nanak, the king asked him if there was some favor he could grant. Nanak politely, yet firmly declined, telling Babar that to beg from a king would be foolhardy since God is the only true benevolent giver. He added, "I hunger for God alone, and ask for naught". Later, Babar learned that Nanak had been imprisoned and ordered his immediate release. He sent for Nanak and this time he asked the master for the favor of his advice. Nanak counseled the King in spiritual matters, using Islamic references and terminology out of respect, and concluded by saying, "Have love of God uppermost in thy heart and hurt not the feelings of His creatures".

One evening in Mecca, Nanak entered a mosque to meditate and fell asleep. He was awakened later by a man who complained that he was in a 'sinful posture', as his feet were pointed toward the crown of the mosque, the direction toward which people prayed. Nanak answered, "Kindly tell me in which direction God is not, so that I may point my feet accordingly". When questioned in Mecca as to

whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim he explained he was neither because he saw the same spirit of God inherent in both. Speaking to the Muslims he told them to make Allah the rosary as he interpreted the wisdom of the prophet. In Mecca, some cried out, “God is speaking to us through Nanak”. When Sheik Farid greeted Nanak he stated, “Thou art Allah”. The master replied, “Allah is the only aim of my life and is the essence of my being”.

Nanak addressed his followers lovingly as ‘Bhai’, or brother. To him, all were brothers, a part of the brethren of God. He viewed all as equals, whether they be rich or poor, high caste or low. He formed a new social consciousness everywhere he went by creating groups of ‘Bhais’ who helped spread his message.

In 1520, Nanak retired from his travels and returned to Kartarpur and his humble roots to work the soil with his family and devotees. For 25 years, Nanak had journeyed far and wide in search of true seekers. Now it was time for them to travel to him. And travel they did. For the remainder of his life, his disciples journeyed from far and wide to the Punjab to bask in the glory of his light. Nanak had gained considerable renown by this time, and many of his visitors had never previously met him; only heard of his spiritual eminence. They poured in from the Middle East, Central Asia, Afghanistan, and the subcontinent, including Brahmins and Sufis, the Siddhas and Naths; people of all colors and castes.

Prior to his death, the master appointed his devoted disciple, Lehna of Khadur, to succeed him in his spiritual mission and renamed him ‘Angad’. He instructed Angad to move across the river to found a new community, as it would be needed in the future to further the work. After Angad had gotten settled in, Nanak found that he continued to spend long hours in meditation, as was his custom. Nanak counseled his dear disciple saying that his meditations had been successful, and now a suffering humanity would need him soon, so it was time to begin to lead a more active life in the world in preparation for Nanak’s departure. Nanak left his mortal frame on September 7, 1539.

The tradition of successorship begun by Nanak spanned 200 years with nine subsequent spiritual masters, culminating in the mission of Guru Gobind Singh. The fifth guru, Arjan, collected Nanak's writings, along with the writings of his predecessors to create the 'Adi Granth', a canon of sacred scripture for the Sikh Society. In addition to Nanak's 974 hymns, Arjan included 541 hymns from Kabir's repertoire, and in keeping with the Sikh view of respect and recognition for past saints and masters, Arjan also added another 300 hymns from 25 saints outside of the Sikh tradition, including works by Ravidas, Namdev, and Dadu.

Arjan chose to open the Adi Granth with a special collection of Nanak's hymns known as Jap Ji, which represent the core of Nanak's mystical teachings. 'Jap' means 'meditation upon', or 'mergence with', and 'Ji' means 'new life'. Taken together, Jap Ji means 'solving the mystery of life through meditation'. Nanak implores us to seek the source of life through communion with the Word. In his hymns, Nanak uses a mixture of Hindu and Islamic references and symbolism to drive home his points. The objective of the spiritual path, according to Nanak, was to become so immersed in God that any distinction between ourselves and God becomes lost. Nanak was qualified to teach the process by which one could attain this objective because he had achieved it himself.

The prologue of Nanak's Jap Ji is somewhat reminiscent of the opening of John's gospel. The term 'Naam' means Word, or Living, Conscious spirit.

*"There is one reality, the Unmanifest-manifested;*

*Ever-existent, He is Naam.*

*The Creator; pervading all;*

*Without fear; without enmity;*

*The Timeless; the Unborn and the Self-existent;*

*Complete within Itself...*

*He was when there was nothing;*

*He was before all ages began;*

*He existeth now, O Nanak,*

*And shall exist forevermore.”*

In the first stanza, Nanak laments the futility of seeking God through ineffective means. Like Lao Tzu, he proclaims that there is a ‘way’ after all.

*“How may one know the Truth and break through the cloud of falsehood?*

*There is a way, O Nanak, to make His Will our own...”*

In his fourth stanza, Nanak reveals that ‘communion with the Word’ is the way.

*“True is the Lord, True His Holy Word;*

*His love has been described as infinite.*

*Men pray to him for gifts, which He grants untiringly.*

*When all is his:*

*What can we offer at His feet?*

*What can we say to win his love?*

*At the ambrosial hour of the early dawn,*

*Be you in communion with the Divine Word*

*And meditate on His Glory.*

*Our birth is the fruit of our actions;*

*But salvation comes only from His grace.*

*O Nanak, know the True One as immanent in all.”*

In the next stanza we can appreciate Nanak, the ‘minstrel-teacher’, encouraging us to sing God’s praises in the spirit of Bhakti.

*“Let us sing of Him and hold communion with the Word,*

*With hearts full of loving devotion;*

*For then shall all sorrows end and we be led joyously Homeward”.*

In stanza six, Nanak implores us to follow the instructions of our master, as Jesus did when he said, ‘If ye love me, keep my commandments’.

*“If I may only please Him, tis pilgrimage enough;*

*If not, nothing – no rites or toils avails;*

*Whichever way I look, I find that in His creation,*

*None has won salvation without His Grace – regardless of karmas.*

*You can discover untold spiritual riches within yourself;*

*If you abide by the teachings of your Master.*

*My Master has taught me one lesson:*

*He is the Lord of everything, may I never forget Him.”*

In stanzas eight through fifteen, Nanak describes the ultimate fate of one who devotes himself to the practice of the Word.

*“By communion with the Word, we can escape unscathed through the portals of death...*

*By communion with the Word, one can have yogic insight with the mysteries of life and self all revealed...*

*By communion with the Word, one becomes the abode of truth, contentment, and true knowledge...*

*By communion with the Word, the spiritually blind find their way to Realization...*

*O Nanak, His devotees live in perpetual ecstasy, for the Word washes away all sin and sorrow.*

*By practice of the Word, one rises into universal consciousness and develops right understanding...*

*By practice of the Word, one is freed from sorrow and suffering...*

*By practice of the Word, one speeds on to the Higher Spiritual planes unhindered...*

*By practice of the Word, one saves not only himself, but when he becomes an adept, many others whom he guides...*

*O, great is the power of the Word,*

*But few there be that know it.”*

In stanza twenty-one, Nanak explains that once a soul reaches the ‘Sea of Immortality’ on the causal plane, our actions here on the earth plane, whether righteous or not, no longer determine our spiritual destiny.

*“Pilgrimages, austerities, mercy, charity, and alms giving, cease to be of any consequence, when one gets an ingress into the Inner Eye;*

*Communion with the practice of the Holy Word, with heart full of devotion,*

*Procures admittance into the Inner Spiritual Realms,*

*Washing away the dirt of sins at the Sacred Fount within.”*

In the next stanza Nanak acknowledges that God’s creation is beyond comprehension, and then in stanza twenty-three, he puts it into perspective.

*“His devotees praise Him, yet never attain full knowledge of the Infinite;*

*Like streams tumbling into the ocean, they know not the depths therein.*

*Even kings and emperors with heaps of wealth and vast dominion,*

*Compare not with an ant filled with the love of God.”*

In stanzas twenty-eight and twenty-nine, Nanak lends encouragement to the aspirant.

*“Let contentment be your earrings...*

*Let preparedness for death be your cloak...*

*Let your master’s teachings be your supporting staff...*

*Let the Divine Music vibrating in all be your trumpet.”*

In stanza thirty-eight, he encourages us further.

*“Make purity your furnace, patience your smithy,*

*The Master’s word your anvil, and true knowledge your hammer.*

*Make awe of God your bellows and with it kindle the fire of austerity,*

*And in the crucible of love, melt the nectar Divine.*

*Only in such a mint can man be cast into the Word.”*

In his finale, Nanak sums up our ultimate fate.

*“Air is the Master, Water the father, and the Earth the mother,*

*Day and Night are the two nurses in whose lap the whole world is at play.*

*Our actions: good and evil, will be brought before his court,*

*And by our own deeds, shall we move higher or be cast into the depths.*

*Those who have communed with the Word, their toils shall end,*

*And their faces shall flame with glory.*

*Not only shall they have salvation,*

*O Nanak, but many more shall find freedom with them.”*

Guru Nanak paved the way for a lineage of Masters to follow him by naming Guru Angad as his successor. One poignant question which has come up with respect to Nanak, and which has been debated for centuries is, ‘did he have a living master’? We know that as a young man he had many teachers who instructed him in theology and various spiritual methods, but none of them trained him in the science of

the Word. The official position of the Sikh brotherhood is that he did not. Having a highly evolved master soul appear in the world spontaneously who is ready to embark on a great spiritual mission is certainly not without precedent. Lord Buddha, for example, appears to have had no living mentor. Nanak was once asked, “Who is your master?” He replied, “Shabd is my master, and my attention is its disciple”. However, in his writings, he suggests that perhaps he did have a living master.

*“I attached myself to the Word, given by my Master.”*

Ramkali, Sidh Gosht, M.1

*“I have made sure by asking it of my Master;”*

Sri Rag, M.1

*“I am a sacrifice to my Master.”*

Asa-di-Var, M.1 and Ramkali Onkar, M.1

*“My Master has taught me one lesson.”*

Jap Ji 6

When Guru Nanak reappeared out of the forest in Sultanpur, after having spent three days apparently lost to the physical world, along with repeating the phrase, “There is no Hindu, there is no Muslim”, he also reported that while in the forest he had met the Lord. He went on to say that he had been given certain esoteric instructions regarding meditation and his spiritual mission. So, did he meet his master in the forest that day physically, or perhaps in his radiant form? According to Kirpal Singh,

incidents like this are not without precedent. “There are instances, though rare, when the sincere aspirants have seen, and received Initiation from the Master even without meeting him physically”.<sup>1</sup>

If in fact Nanak did have a guru, it could only have been one person: Kabir. While we do not have any specific written accounts of what took place during Nanak’s travels, we do have general information. We know that he deliberately sought out any and all spiritual luminaries who were alive at the time. During Nanak’s eastern journey, he certainly visited Benares, a city known as a spiritual hub. Kabir, by this time, was famous in Benares, or in the eyes of some, infamous. It is difficult to imagine the two men not meeting personally. Kabir was about thirty years older, an ideal age difference for a guru-disciple relationship. But the most compelling case for the Kabir-Nanak relationship is their teachings. If you were to walk into the middle of a lecture on one or the other’s teachings, you wouldn’t know if the subject of the lecture was Nanak or Kabir. They’re that close. They were as one soul in two bodies. They were both musical and both prolific writers. They were both reformers, condemning archaic religious practices. They even used similar imagery and terminology in their hymns. For example, Kabir attacks the yogic lifestyle in a way strikingly similar to Nanak.

*“The Yogi dyes his garments, instead of dyeing his mind in the colors of love;*

*He sits within the temple of the Lord, leaving Brahma to worship a stone.*

*He pierces holes in his ears; he has a great beard and matted locks, and looks like a goat;*

*He goes forth into the wilderness, killing all his desires, and turns himself into a eunuch;*

*He shaves his head; he reads the Gita and becomes a mighty talker.*

*Kabir says; ‘You are going to the doors of death, bound hand and foot’.*”

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<sup>1</sup> Kirpal Singh, *Spiritual Elixir*, Sant Bani Press, 1970

In another hymn, Kabir attacks religious observances using the term, 'True Name', a term adopted by Nanak (Sat Naam).

*"O brother! When I was forgetful, my true Master showed me the way.*

*Then I left off all rites and ceremonies, I bathed no more in the holy water;*

*From that time forth I knew no more how to roll in the dust in obeisance;*

*I do not ring the temple bell;*

*I do not set the idol on its throne;*

*I do not worship the image with flowers;*

*It is not austerities that mortify the flesh which are pleasing to the Lord.*

*When you leave off your clothes and kill your senses, you do not please the Lord.*

*The man who is kind and who practices righteousness,*

*Who remains passive amidst the affairs of the world,*

*Who considers all creatures on earth as his own self,*

*He attains the Immortal Being, and the true God is ever with him.*

*Kabir says; 'He attains the True Name whose words are pure, and who is free from pride and conceit'."*

In this hymn, Kabir equates Allah with Ram, in a spirit akin to Nanak.

*"Hari is in the East; Allah is in the West.*

*Look within your heart, for there you will find both Karim and Ram.*

*All the men and women of the world are His living forms.*

*Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram.*

*He is my Guru, He is my Pir.”*

Kabir, like Nanak, uses the term, ‘Word’ to mean the elemental essence of creation.

*“Receive that Word from which the Universe springeth!*

*That Word is the Guru; I have heard it, and become its disciple.*

*How many are there who know the meaning of that Word?*

*O Sadhu! Practice that Word!*

*The Vedas and the Puranas proclaim it,*

*The world is established in it,*

*The Rishis and devotees speak of it;*

*But none knows the mystery of the Word.*

*From that Word the world-form has sprung.*

*That Word reveals all.*

*Kabir says; ‘But who knows from whence the Word cometh’!”*

If there was no direct tie-in between the two, either physical or mystical, the equivalency of their teachings is astounding.

Nanak created a great flood of spirituality which was dammed up in Amritsar and throughout the Punjab, benefitting ten generations of Indians. But spirituality, like water, finds its own course to run,

and run it did, around and over the dam, across all of India, and ultimately, throughout the rest of the world.