

Mysticism in Sikhism

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Mysticism in the ordinary connotation means a pursuit of communion with identity, with conscious awareness of an ultimate reality, divinity, spiritual truth or God, through direct intuition, instinct or insight. It can be an experience of divine consciousness enlightenment and ultimate union with God.

The word 'Sikh' originates from the Sanskrit word 'Shishya,' which means disciple, follower, or learner. One who follows the basic tenets of Sikhism is called a 'Sikh.' Sikhism, because of its distinctive form and symbols, has intrigued and amazed those who are unacquainted with its history and doctrines. The wearing of a beard and the long unshorn hair embody and communicate strong ethics: an enlightened and progressive human being with strong commitment and sincerity.

Guru Nanak, the founder of the Sikhism, was not a typical mystic absorbed in the love of God for personal salvation, but was deeply involved for the upliftment of humanity. Sikh Gurus, mystics, and the contributors to the holy book of the Sikhs, Guru Granth Sahib, far from dwelling on purely theological issues, connected themselves with the world. For them, religion, spirituality or the search to unfold the mysteries of the universe and God is not cut off from the world. They bring Din Dharam (religion) into Duniya (world). Their mysticism tries to translate and illustrate a perfect equilibrium and balance between God and human beings. It is for the construction of a better human being; one who constantly tries to overcome evils and weaknesses, who builds a strong character, who repeats God's name, meditates and ponders on the problems of fellow beings, believes in the dignity of labour, and who shares his hard, honestly-earned earnings with the needy and have-nots. This is applied mysticism--to unfold the mysteries of the universe and the intricacies of religion, and to solve socio-economic problems of the world.

The very opening verse of Guru Granth Sahib describes and defines God as 'Saibhams,' which originates from 'Svyam Bhu,' or self-existent. It says:

*There is one God He is the Supreme truth
He is the creator, is without fear and without hate
He is the omnipresent and prevails the universe.*

There are two symbolic words in Sikh scriptures, 'ekamkar' and 'omkar,' which describe the cosmic being in His transcendent forms and the cosmic process. Guru says:

*Manifest or unmanifest, He is always one
The one is revealed
The one is hidden
The one is behind the dark evil.²*

He is omnipresent and immense. Sikh Gurus do not believe that God lives on mountains or in heaven. Guru Gobind Singh says:

*On the mountain is God, in the cave is God
On the earth is God, in the sky is God
Here is God, there is God
In the world is God, in the firmament is God (Akal Ustat 52-53)*

God is self-accomplished, all-powerful, all-pervading: all causation and all results.

The one Lord is the cause of all causes. Knowledge, wisdom, and discrimination are His gifts to us.

He is not far, He is not near, He is with us all. Saith Nanak: "Praise the Lord with abiding love."⁴

What is required thus is complete submission to His power authority and hokum (or order):

*The one God is the father of all
We are all His children
O Guru O friend I dedicate my heart to Thee
Let me but have a glimpse of God.⁵*

This yearning, craving and the pangs of love for Him brings one closer to the Almighty. What establishes our trust and faith in God is His love for the righteous man. Bhai Gurdass says: "If man goes one step towards him, the Lord comes a thousand steps towards man."

"God's love is not an act but a principle of all acts. God is present to His every creature not simply in virtue of the life spirit He bestows on him. He manifests Himself through the love He excites in every heart. It is because of this love present in every being as a creative principle that the whole world is tense with one immense aspiration, quickening and unifying and drawing everyone towards the 'First Beloved.'"⁶ As per Sikh mysticism, the ultimate condition in this love relationship is that the lover of God must see his beloved in everyone.

*On the path of love
Lies the glory of a thousand thrones
The seekers of truth care not
For jewels, crowns or kingdom
Transient are these precious things of the world
Deem them not lovers who know not the mystery of love.
But where are the eyes
That can see Him everywhere?⁷*

Love of God descends and manifests itself as grace of God. To receive this grace, one has to overcome ego, selfishness and ignorance. One has to cleanse oneself, as a utensil is cleaned before putting milk into it. Before putting milk into it one has to disinfect the utensil. Likewise, mind and body need to be purified with good deeds and reciting His name.

Sharing the path of emotional and religious integration: Guru Nanak's message to both Hindus and Muslims is that without good deeds (karmas) both have to cry.

To Muslims he said:

*Five prayers, five times a day with five different names
Make the first prayer the Truth,
Second to lawfully earn your daily bread
The third charity in the name of God
Fourth purity of mind, and let good deeds be your articles of faith Kalma.*

Then you can call yourself truly a Muslim.

To Sidha jogis he said,

Ascetism does not lie in the trees or robes, nor in the walking staff nor in the ashes. Ascetism does not lie in the earring, nor in the shaven head nor in blowing a conch. Ascetism lies in remaining pure amongst impurities.¹⁰

Modesty is a prerequisite to the path of devotion; the path of ego, fallacy and hypocrisy is the path of destruction. The light of mind is eclipsed by the dirt of ego. The mind and the intellect, the outer covering of the soul, need to be kept intact to receive His grace, 'Prasada.' The merciful, benevolent masters have hope and happiness for all, even the evil-oriented and crooked people in this world. It has been very strongly stated that the five sins or five thieves, viz. lust, anger, greed, attachment and pride, dominate and degrade human beings; but the order and advice of the Lord is that humans are fortunately endowed with sufficient power and capacity to overcome these. Gurbani says:

Dominions, wealth, beauty, pride of caste and youthfulness; all these five are deceivers. These have deceived the whole world (of goodness) ...[But] these too are robbed or overcome by those who take shelter of the true master. ¹¹

Reassuring the meritless, depraved and dismayed humanity, Sikh tradition offers hope and high-spiritedness, 'Chardikala,' upward feelings, and positive and constructive thinking.

*The true Guru has turned mere mortals
Into God-like saints
And that too without a moment's delay. ¹²*

jin maanas thae dhaevathae keeeae karath n laagee vaar |1|
(Guru Granth Sahib, p. 462, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

It is an assurance of all help in the most troublesome times, in the state of utter helplessness; but it can happen only by true faith and His grace.

*When the sky is overcast
And the tempest is at its height
With the sea lashed into millions of waves
Call on the True Guru at that moment
And be free from this
Fear of the sinking of your boat. ¹³*

Whereas in some religions, misery of human body has been lamented, the Sikh mystic Bhai Gurdass says: "Man alone can use his eyes, ears, hands and mind to toil for higher truths of life and live like a God on earth, full of other living creatures. He alone rises above himself to realize truth."¹⁴ For Sikh Gurus, the body is a temple of God in which are revealed precious pearls of knowledge.¹⁵

Guru Amar Dass Ji in Anand Sahib says:

*O my body, God infused His light in thee
And you were born in the world.
In thee the God kindled His light
Then you came to the world.

I searched and searched the body within.
The Guru revealed Life's mystery therein.¹⁶*

Sikhism does not shun and hate the human body, neither does it look on the flesh with cynical contempt to control and advise it. Rather, man is encouraged to eat, drink and live a

peaceful, cheerful, and enlightened, decent life. Man is not prevented from possessing anything in this world. The best gifts of God are to be enjoyed, under the condition not to forget His Name, do good karmas and have good conduct. It is a very simple and straight message, which touches heart and soul. It is a game of love and sacrifice for the co-existence and happiness of others.

Even if you construct a house of real pearls studded with diamonds and have authority and power to rule the whole world, you should not forget God.

mothee th mandhar oosarehi rathanee th hohi jarraao |
kastoor, kungoo, agar, chandan, leep aavai chaa-o
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 14, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

According to Guru Nanak, God is truth, therefore truthful living can make us God-like and God-oriented. He goes to the extent of saying that truth is Higher in the spiritual realm, but higher than Truth is Truthful living.

sachahu ourai sabh ko oupar sach aachaar |5|
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 62, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

The spirit is to be so elevated that it paves its way to the ultimate and at the same time pays its debt to society. Focus on the elevation of spirit is possible by adopting the examples of the lotus flower and the feathers of the floating bird, who live in water but water cannot wet them.

As the Lotus in the water is not wet

Nor the fowl sporting in a stream

jaisae jal mehi kamal niraalam muragaaee nai saanae |
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 938, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

It should lead to self-imposed discipline rather than authoritarian orders; that is, to speak less, eat less and work more.

Human life is an opportunity to rise or fall because of past and present karmas. The fact that man suffers for his bad deeds or is rewarded for his good deeds inevitably leads to the theory of karma. Gurbani says the burden of our sins, the taint of karma, the weight of all past lives can be thrown off by diving deeper into truth, by the grace of God by his sight, '*nazar*,' and by leading a pure and noble life. It is the concepts of karmas and free will; those who lead a

purely materialistic life at the level of the senses: "Their deeds follow them and they reap what they sow."¹⁸

jith keethaa paateeai aapanaa saa ghaal buree kio ghaaleeai |
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 474, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

"By living a meaningful life, by serving society and meditating on Thy name, one can change the Karmas."

"The Gurus' words erase the blot of thousands of evil deeds of the past, and the greatest sinner can become the greater saint."¹⁹

Commented [MP1]: Should this be two quotes or one?

Guru Nanak and the subsequent Sikh Gurus had the closest doctrinal relations with the Chisti and the Qadiriya schools of Sufis, which believed in free will. "The idea of determinism and fatalism is repugnant to the Sikh mind as it does not reconcile with the idea of reward and punishment, nor with the doctrine of Grace and compassion."²⁰ There is no doubt that "Countless sins of the past life are washed away by the illumination of the word."²¹

Sorrow and happiness, hell and heaven are concepts and realities that have baffled the whole world. Hell has been pictured symbolically as an intense experience. None would like to go through this experience; thus, man must try all possible actions and situations to avoid it. In the love of God, Sikh mysticism rises to the heights of disinterestedness and is free from the fear of the hell or a longing and craze for joys of heaven and paradise. It gives birth to courage:

gagan dhamaamaa baajiou pariou neesaanaai ghao |
The battle-drum beats in the sky of the mind; aim is taken, and the wound is inflicted.

khaeth j maaddiou sooramaa ab joojhan ko dhao | 1 |
The spiritual warriors enter the field of battle; now is the time to fight!
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 1105, Bhagat Kabir Ji)

Guru Nanak has differentiated sorrows such as separation from beloved ones, sorrows of hunger, tyranny, death, physical and mental disease.²² Sheikh Farid says:

*I thought sorrow had engulfed me only,
But the whole world is engulfed in grief,
On looking at the world from the higher plane
I found every home ablaze with sorrow's flames.*

Then what can be the path and ways to have eternal happiness and contentment? The purification of heart is essential. One who purifies his heart is not only a wise man, but also, the one who destroys all impurity is a true man of faith. For cleansing the mind and heart, the

easiest way is to practice Sewa, or voluntary service. Guru Nanak says “If we serve the mankind in this world then we will be honored in the court of God.”²³ For Bhakti and salvation, seva is very important; the mysticism of Sikhism is for householders. It is religion of the workers who believe in the dignity of labour, ‘Kirt Karma:’ working hard with honest means to earn livelihood. Beggary, parasitism and taking alms are strictly forbidden. When all individuals in society earn their bread through honest, moral and productive labour, the evils of capitalism and exploitation of people can come to an end.

It is not only working hard; sharing, ‘Vand Chakhna,’ is very, very important. A true Sikh must share his earnings for the collective welfare of the community and the weaker sections of society. The Sikh community believes and practices this principle. Guru Nanak said,

*He alone, O Nanak! Knoweth the way who earneth with
the sweat of his brow and then shareth it with others*

ghaal khaae kish hathahu dhaee |

naanak raahu pashaanehi saee |1|
(Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1245, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

The Sikh doctrines of naam japo, kirat karo and vand chakho are pivotal to Sikh ethics and practices. These are the basic factors of a progressive outlook, healthy growth and prosperity of the community.

The directions of the Guru and Bhakta saints and sages of the Sikh way of life for a common man are to lead a real spiritual life and combine in themselves a social pattern that will give rise to toleration for the views of others and a common desire to work for the welfare of all of mankind. They are establishing a dialogue with other communities and religions. As long as we are in the world we should listen and speak to everybody.

jab lag dhuneaaa reheeai naanak kish suneeai kish keheeai |
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 661, Guru Nanak Dev Ji)

This means solving the burning problems of the world by peaceful discussions and resolutions.

The approach of Sikh philosophy for changing the wrong-doers is not with a long list of do’s and don’ts, but a simple caution and warning: “Why do such evil deeds that fruition into evil?”

Do not do any evil at all. Look ahead to the future with foresight.

Sikh mysticism commands and advises everybody to follow, let good deeds be your soil and Guru's word the seed. Irrigate it daily with the water of Truth. Turn yourself into a cultivator, and let the crop of faith germinate, enabling you to know thereby the difference between the state of heaven and hell.

*Let the mind be ploughman, good deeds the ploughing, honest striving the water
and your body the field,
Let God's name be the seed, contentment the leveler and the humanity garb,
Let your actions be sprouts, the crop will grow
And you will see your home blessed with prosperity.²⁶*

This wish of plenty of prosperity, happiness, co-existence, harmony and love for all of humankind is reflected in the spirit of "Nanak Nam charhdi kala, Tere bhane sarbatt da bhala." In the name of Guru Nanak let us have high spirits, let there be good for everybody. That is, highly constructive and positive thinking in all circumstances. Mystic Ravi Dass, a great saint, actually visits an ideal city state in the moment of spiritual ecstasy. He says:

*Begampura (land without troubles and pain) is the name of the
city
There is neither grief nor anxiety
There is neither trouble nor any tax or commodities,
No fear, no blemish, no downfall
Now I have achieved entry in this good land,
Where there is always peace
Where rule is steadfast and eternal
None is of second or third state, all are equal
The fame of this habitation is eternal
Where everyone is affluent and contented
The residents move freely according to their will
They are acquainted with the abode and no one stands in their
way.*

Ravi Dass, the cobbler enjoys freedom and says whosoever is the fellow citizen, he is my friend. Such an ideal state can become a reality if every religion works together for peaceful co-existence by taking refuge in the name of Almighty God and adopts high ethical qualities without terrorizing others.

bhai kaahoo ko dhaeth nehi bhai maanath aan |
One who does not frighten anyone, and who is not afraid of anyone else
(Guru Granth Sahib p. 1427, Guru Teg Bahadur Ji)

Today we should take this pledge neither to terrorize anybody nor to be terrorized. Instead of God-fearing, we need to be God-loving.

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Footnotes:

1. L.M. Joshi – P.59, “An Introduction to Indian Religions,” co-authored with Hukam Singh, Punjab University, 1973.
2. Guru Granth Sahib – P.1215
3. Akal Ustat – P.52-53
4. Guru Granth Sahib – P.235
5. Guru Granth Sahib – P.61
6. Joshi – P.57
7. Joshi – P.58, Bhai Nand Lal Goya – P.27,28
8. Joshi – P.127,131
9. Guru Granth Sahib – P .141
10. Guru Granth Sahib – P.730
11. 1288 Madan 178
12. 462 Madan
13. 1410 Madan
14. Bhai Gurdass – Var I Paudi 3
15. 1346
16. 695
17. 62
18. 48
19. 1195
20. L.M. Joshi – P.76-77
21. Guru Granth Sahib – P.438
22. 1256
23. 26
24. 1245
25. 661
26. 595
27. 345

Addendum

From God arose air, from air water, from water the three worlds with His height in every self.

As per Sikh mysticism, creation of God and God himself cannot be limited; He is without limits. There are countless universes that have diverse forms of species and colours. Later on, science proved that there are many suns, moons, upper and lower regions. God is always himself apni-ap. He is not subject to birth or death, change or dissolution as are all material things. Human minds can neither comprehend him nor he can be compared with something. He is spirit and light, perfectly pre-light (Joti).