

Seva

Seva

Sikh Wisdom for Living Well
by Doing Good

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*For my parents, Shaji and Simmy
Thank you for giving me wings*

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Preface

I wrote this book to celebrate everything I love about Sikhism. I am a Sikh because I was born into a Sikh family but I also genuinely enjoy being part of this community, believing that it makes me a happier and more joyful person. I think all people, religious or not, can benefit from the way we approach life.

You've probably seen Sikh men with their distinctive beards and turbans or have spotted our gurdwaras (Sikh temples) which serve free food to all, or maybe you've heard Sikh holy chants, called kirtans, while doing a Kundalini yoga class. But who are the Sikhs? What is seva? And what drives our fearless generosity in helping absolute strangers? Let me give you some background before I deliver lessons

derived from our culture and faith.

Sikhism, or Sikhi, is the youngest world religion at 552 years old. It has about 30 million followers; 22 million reside in India and the rest abroad – they're considered a thriving and prosperous expat community world over from Birmingham, UK to Vancouver, Canada. We call our men sardars and women sardarnis. Our gurdwaras aren't just temples, they're also soup kitchens and homeless shelters. When we visit, we first bow our head down to our holy book called the Guru Granth Sahib, then pray and listen to soulful kirtans and eventually make our way to the kitchen area. There we all help to cook a simple, tasty meal called langar which is served for free to anyone who wishes to partake in it. We do all this because it is part of our culture but to fully understand Sikhi we need to look at the context in which it was created.

The founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak was born in the fifteenth century when the society in erstwhile Punjab (the original land of the Sikhs, and now a state in India bordering Pakistan)

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was rather unequal. The Hindu caste system was prevalent among the masses and the land was ruled the by Mughal monarchy. Nanak's solution to this was to preach about kindness, equality and hard work and to tell his disciples to incorporate these values into their daily lives. His revolutionary idea was to help others without any expectation of reward or personal gain in return. This is how *seva* – or 'selfless service' – was born and it is the most impactful thing the Sikh community does. Hence it is the topic and title of my book.

Today, so many people – not just Sikhs or Indians but people from other countries, too – tell me they find it peaceful to visit a gurdwara and find that Guru Nanak's teachings bring harmony and balance into their lives. But the first Sikh Guru was actually quite counter-cultural in his time. Back then, it was only the wealthy classes who kept their hair long and wore turbans. Nanak and the later Sikh gurus (there were ten gurus in total and eventually the guruship was transferred onto our holy book)

adopted these practices to equate themselves to people in the higher strata of society. He believed in equality and everyone, not only those born into the higher classes, should be treated like high equals. In the same spirit, Guru Gobind Singh Ji, the tenth Sikh guru, gave all Sikh men the name of Singh (meaning 'lion') because Rajpur royals used that name – later he also gave Sikh women the name Kaur (meaning 'princess'). Even the nomenclature of sardar comes from the title of Mughal army leaders.

My book breaks down the Sikh nature of doing good. Along with our distinctive visual identities and selfless acts of seva there are other traits and behaviors associated with Sikhs. In India, Sikhs have a reputation for being brave and standing up for the right cause even at great personal cost. They are also known to be happy-go-lucky folks who readily laugh at their own expense, despite carrying the legacy of a troubled history – Punjab bore the brunt of India-Pakistan's partition violence and Sikhs

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were the ones mainly affected by the Jallianwala Bagh shooting and the gut-wrenching violence in the wake of the death of prime minister, Indira Gandhi.

But through this all, we remain resilient and rebuild our lives through hard work. If there's ever a natural disaster or act of terrorism, Indians know that a gurdwara is a safe haven for them. Sikhs will be the first to offer help not just to fellow Sikhs but to everyone irrespective of their background. Of course, these are stereotypes but they do stem from some truth. I've seen it in my life and it was further validated in the research for this book. Each of the eight chapters in my book is dedicated to a particular Sikh trait: selfless service, joy, courage, resilience, humour, hard work, equality and positivity. Embodying them will help you do more good and also lead a better life.

Lastly, I truly believe that these lessons can benefit everyone no matter where they live in the world or what they believe in. You don't need to be religious to read this book; I

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rely heavily on evidence from the behavioral sciences to back my findings. So get ready to be surprised because truth be told, approaching life from a strong, ethical and joyful place is rather light on the heart. Seva is a solution that is as extraordinary as it is simple.

Introduction

Why Do Sikhs Do Good?

Think of any scene of disaster in India and you'll find a common thread: Sikh volunteers rallying to the site, feeding migrant workers, giving assistance to riot victims, and cleaning up after earthquakes. In the past year, full of so much difficult news, this 30-million-strong community stood out yet again for their extraordinary acts of kindness.

In 2021 alone, the media has reported some incredible stories on this very subject.

- The Hemkunt Foundation, started by Harteerath Singh and his family, set up oxygen langars in various cities like New Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata to help Covid-19 patients when India was facing an oxygen shortage.

- Gurdwara Rakab Ganj Sahib in New Delhi launched the Guru Tegh Bahadur Covid Care Centre to make up for the shortage of hospital beds in the city during the pandemic.
- Bangla Sahib gurdwara in New Delhi launched India's biggest free-of-charge dialysis centre this year. The Guru Harkishan Institute of Medical Sciences and Research Kidney Dialysis Hospital, situated in the gurdwara complex, can offer dialysis facility to 101 patients simultaneously and cater to a total of 500 patients every day.
- In Dubai, a gurdwara trust worked with a healthcare organization to provide 5000 Covid-19 vaccines to people of all ages and backgrounds.
- Gurdwara Takht Shri Huzoor Sahib in Nanded, Maharashtra, decided to use all the gold donated by devotees over the past fifty years to construct hospitals and medical colleges. Currently, residents of Nanded travel to Hyderabad or Mumbai for medical treatment.

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All through the 2020 pandemic, Sikhs reached new heights of doing seva:

- Since religious gatherings were prohibited, Sikhs distributed langar (the free meal served by gurdwaras to anyone who wishes to partake of it) and groceries via food delivery trucks and drive-through set-ups all over the world.
- Baba Karnail Singh Khaira, the 81-year-old head of the Dera Kar Seva Gurdwara Langar Sahib, fed over 2 million migrants on Maharashtra's highway in three months following the nationwide lockdown.
- In June 2020, the *New York Times* piece titled 'How to Feed Crowds in a Protest or a Pandemic? The Sikhs Know' highlighted seva done by American Sikhs in Queens, New York, during the pandemic and in Los Angeles during the Black Lives Matter protests.
- In Detroit, Shalinder Singh and his family distributed hundreds of pizza pies to front line workers like police officers, hospital staff and firefighters.

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- The Dashmesh Culture Centre in Calgary built a vegetable garden in an attempt to bring people together in a safe, Covid-friendly outdoor space. The food grown is used in langar but can also be taken home by individuals for their own kitchens.
- The *Tribune*, Chandigarh, published a story about a Sikh vegetable vendor, Baljinder Singh, who has been doing seva at Khairuddin mosque in Amritsar for the past forty years. Every Friday he wraps up work in the morning and spends his afternoons looking after the footwear of the devotees praying inside the mosque.

What makes Sikhs do so much good, these acts of seva as they call it? Is there something in their values that makes them so generous, so giving? And how can the rest of us learn from them? This was the question I started this book with.

My understanding of Sikhi – the word we use to describe our religion – stems from what I saw in my home. My father was my first

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living, embodied experience of the philosophy. Growing up, I described him as ‘Santa Claus with a black beard’ because he managed to put a smile on my face every day. He is a quintessentially jovial, hard-working and sometimes scary sardarji, who taught me to always do the right thing. It is his personality and philosophy that have kept me close to my Sikh roots, no matter where I’ve drifted in life.

My mother spent her evenings kneading dough at our local gurdwara and encouraged me and my brother to distribute parshadas (flatbreads) during langar. Her motivation for seva came from the joy she experienced listening to kirtans – devotional songs – which quenched her spiritual thirst.

My nani (maternal grandmother) told my brother and me stories of Partition (between India and Pakistan), and we listened with wide-eyed fascination. We also learned that our papa had to stay home and not go to the office to be safe during the 1984 massacre in Delhi. But these tales weren’t retold to incite hatred or seek

revenge. On the contrary, our legacy of being protectors was emphasized. Kind has been cool among Sikhs way before it became a Brooklyn hipster motto.

Writing this book became an opportunity to look back and even investigate my upbringing. When you're from within the community, doing seva feels like second nature and you don't expect even a pat on the back for your contribution. So to begin with, I had to take a step back and break down all the elements of my upbringing that I had taken for granted. I delved into Sikh history and our rich storytelling tradition of narrating sakhis, parables about the lives of our ten gurus, looked at some of the cutting-edge research in science, psychology and behavioural studies, and conducted numerous interviews with Sikhs around the world.

I found that **you can distil Sikhi into seven simple, everyday behaviours or attitudes** that can be transformative for anyone. The first is the one we all associate with Sikhism – the idea of seva. Seva means selfless service, and

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in Sikhism it is not just an exhortation and a guide but a daily practice, just the same as cleaning the house or cooking. It is through their extraordinary acts of seva that Sikhs have gained the reputation of being the world's Good Samaritans, as you can see from the examples I listed earlier.

Going out into the world to help other people is entwined with various other values that Sikhi asks its followers to imbibe. Guru Nanak told Sikhs seva is as important as prayer, but he also told them to work hard and be mindful, to live lightly and smile – even in the face of hardship – to step out of their comfort zones and be brave.

Doing good is not an isolated attribute. Living a meaningful, joyful life is what fires the emotion of doing seva. That is why Sikhs lovingly fed langar to the very cops they are up against at farmer protest sites across North India. Ultimately what makes Sikhi – and the way Sikhs approach doing good – stand apart is the optimism, joy and resilience with which

their actions are done. This positivity – what the Sikhs call *chardi kala* – is what makes it possible for Sikhs to give so much. I argue in this book that Sikhi shows us how doing good can be a celebration and not a duty. This is the Sikh secret to doing good. It's possible for all of us to make this shift in ourselves.

Now every religion teaches us to do good and be good, so why is it that such a high proportion of Sikhs do good? One central reason is the way Guru Nanak designed the religion. During his spiritual journey, Guru Nanak spent time with hermits living in mountain caves. Eventually, he rejected the idea of asceticism and, instead, encouraged the householder's role and told people to live honourably in and with the world. **Sikhism is thus created for our daily lives. It gives us guidance on how to live as parents, children, friends, employees, neighbours, colleagues and ultimately as fellow human beings.** Nanak taught people how to incorporate kindness,

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equality and hard work into daily life while simultaneously making place for relationships, jobs, weekends, celebrations and sorrows. He used a basic, natural simile to explain this to his followers. Live in the world but remain untouched by it, just like a lotus flower which grows in muddy waters but rises beautifully above them.

I must add the caveat here that I'm not claiming every Sikh is a paragon of virtue. Not all Sikhs are kind, hard-working, good-humoured and brave. Some are criminals and perpetrators of violence. I myself don't epitomize every single Sikh virtue. Sikhs, just like everyone else, are complex individuals, and when I refer to Sikhs doing or thinking a certain thing, I do not claim to speak for all Sikhs in the world. For the purpose of understanding the community's overall values, I make generalizations in this book.

The point is to study the Sikh way of life which offers wonderful lessons on how to be

good in the real world despite having jobs, kids, social lives and health routines. I hope you find some value in unravelling the Sikh mindset – those of you who believe in religion and even those of you who don't.

It's hard not to be changed in the process of writing a book. All these years I was shaping narratives, but this narrative has shaped me. In the last decade, India's political climate had left me disenchanted with religion altogether. But while writing this book, I had the epiphany that Sikhism is not, in fact, my religion but my conscience. It has guided not just my life's decisions but also my simplest interactions from a very young age.

I gave birth to my baby boy, Azad, a month before I took on this book project and chose to give him the middle name of Singh. It turns out that when the time came to pass on my own legacy, I am as Sikh as they come. The seven behaviours I write about here are the values I will give him as part of his Sikh legacy. As we chant during ardaas (Sikh prayer):

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*Nanak naam chardi kala, tere bhane sarbat da
bhala*

(Nanak, with naam, that is, divinity, comes eternal positivity. With God's will, may there be peace and prosperity for everyone in the world)

Rule # 1

Help Someone Every Day