

Guidance note on issues surrounding death in a Sikh family



UK Sikh Healthcare Chaplaincy Group

In Sikhism a funeral ceremony is called "**Antam Sanskaar**," or celebration of the completion of life. Rather than lamenting the passing of an individual, Sikhism teaches resignation to the will of the creator, emphasizing that death is a natural process, and an opportunity for reunion of the soul with its maker.

The Final Moments of Life in Sikhism

In the final moments of life, and at the time of passing, the Sikh family encourages their ailing loved one to focus on the divine by reciting "Waheguru," or suitable passages of scripture from the Guru Granth Sahib. In many cases, Kirtan Sohila is recited either in the last moments or just after the person has passed away. In Sikhism, after a death occurs, funeral arrangements are made by the family which includes conducting a Sidharan Paath, or a complete reading of the Guru Granth Sahib. The Sidharan paath is carried out over a period of ten days following the funeral ceremony after which formal mourning concludes.

Preparation of the Deceased

The body of the deceased Sikh is bathed and attired in clean clothing. The hair is covered with a turban or traditional scarf as usually worn by the individual who has passed away. The karkars, or five articles of faith worn by a Sikh in life, remain with the body in death.

Cremation

In Sikhism cremation is the usual method for disposal of remains regardless of the age of the deceased.

Disposal of Ashes

The funeral home releases the cremated remains of the deceased to the family. Sikhism recommends that the ashes of the deceased be either buried in the earth, or scattered over or immersed in flowing water such as a river or sea.

Funeral Services

In Sikhism, a funeral ceremony may take place at any time of day or night, as is convenient and be either formal or informal. Sikh funeral services are meant to induce detachment and promote resignation to the will of the divine. A service may be conducted:

- Out of doors.
- In a gurdwara.
- At a funeral home.
- At the home of relatives.

Every Sikh funeral service, however simple or complex, consists of reciting the final prayer of the day, Kirtan Sohila, and the offering of Ardas. Both may be performed prior to cremation, the scattering of ashes, or otherwise disposing of remains.

The Sidaran Paath

The ceremony, in which the Sidharan Paath is begun, may be held when convenient, wherever the Guru Granth Sahib is present:

- Hymns are sung from the scripture of the Guru Granth.
- The first five and final verses of "Anand Sahib," the "Song of Bliss," are recited or sung.
- The first five verses of Sikhism's morning prayer, "Japji Sahib," are read aloud to begin the Sidharan paath.
- A hukam, or random verse, is read from the Guru Granth.
- Ardas, a prayer, is offered.
- Prashad, a sacred sweet, is distributed.
- Langar, a meal, is served to guests.

While the Sidharan paath is being read, the family may also sing hymns daily. Reading may take as long as needed to complete the paath, however formal mourning does not extend beyond ten days.

Suitable Hymns for a Sikh Funeral

Hymns sung at a Sikh funeral offer solace to the bereaved by emphasizing the blending of the departed soul with the divine. The hymns are compositions taken from the Guru Granth Sahib such as:

- Jeevan maran sukh ho-e jinhaa gur paa-i-aa||

In life and in death, peace resides with those who attain their Guru."

- Jot milee sang jot reh-i-aa ghaal-daa||

My light merges with the Supreme light, and my labors are over."

- Sooraj kiran milae jal kaa jal hooaa raam||

The sunbeam blends with sunlight and the water drop is absorbed into water becoming saturated."

- Oudak samund salal kee saakhiaa nadee tarang samaaveh-gae||

Like droplets of water are in an ocean wave and the ripples of a stream, I am immersed in the Lord."

Inappropriate Mourning

Ritualized mourning is considered contrary to Sikh belief. Customs and practices avoided in Sikhism include:

- Lighting a lamp to guide the soul.
- Offering donations on behalf of the soul.
- Austerities performed on behalf of the soul.
- Organized grieving such as wailing and lamentation.
- Marking a grave site with a grave stone or monument.
- Piercing the skull during cremation for release of the soul.

A discourse on death and its significance in Sikhism

Q: What happens after death?

A: Sikhs are very strong in their belief of reincarnation. All animals including humans have soul and our soul goes through different life forms until we purify it to become One with God. Just like one changes clothes, our soul changes life forms. This very fact has been narrated by God through Sikh Gurus. Nobody has seen what happens after death, so it is very hard for someone to understand happens after death. Sikh Gurus are in communion with God and they tell us that our soul has been separated from God and its dignity remains in merging back with God.

Think of God as an ocean and our soul as a droplet of water. The water droplet is separated from the ocean. The droplets come on land in the form of rain. We are like those rain droplets; we have been separated from God

and have been born in this world. The dignity of the rain droplet lies in merging back in the ocean. Just like those rain droplets the main purpose of our souls is to merge back with God, to be One with Him. Our soul suffers from pain of birth and death and this pain can be ended by attaining salvation, merging in God. Gurus are like rivers, if the rain droplets follow the river, they can reach the ocean. So, if we follow our Gurus, we can meet God. Once a soul merges in God, it achieves salvation, gets rid of birth and death and all the suffering of this world. That soul becomes one with God.

How do we know we are reborn? We take birth and we do die. Sikhism does believe in the existence of heaven and hell, however, heaven and hell are created to reward and punish, one will then take birth again until one merges in God. According to some religion, the soul either goes to heaven or hell after death and stays there. So, how are people and other animals being born on this Earth? Is God creating new souls? If He is then no matter how big is heaven or hell it is going to be filled. If you consider a lake as heaven and think of drops of water being added to it as souls, then no matter how big the lake is, if no drops of water is leaving the lake, it is going to be filled some time in future. Our souls just ending in heaven or hell after death and God creating new soul doesn't make sense. If God creates new souls, then why are children born with disabilities? Souls are born with disabilities because of the bad deeds they committed in their previous life. It is up to God if he sends the soul to hell to make it realize the consequences of its actions or be born and make it realize in its next life.

If you look at our environment, there is a perfect cycle that goes on everywhere. Water evaporates from the ocean, travels on the land and mingles back with the ocean. There is a perfect cycle that goes in our environment which keeps it healthy. Sikh Gurus wrote in the scriptures what God narrated to them. According to the scriptures, there are 8.4 million species and your soul goes through them all. "Those who do not serve the true Guru, and do not contemplate on the Shabad (Word of God). They cannot comprehend spiritual wisdom; they are like dead bodies in the world. They go through the cycle of 8.4 million reincarnations, and they are ruined through death and rebirth" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 88). According to the Sikh scriptures, the human form is the closest form to God and the best opportunity for a human being attain salvation and merge back with God. After death our soul does not die or stays either in heaven or hell. Sikh Gurus said that nothing dies, nothing is born, everything is ever present, and it just changes forms. That is a higher philosophy. It's like standing in front of a wardrobe, you pick up a dress and wear it and then you discard it. You wear another one. You're just changing one form into another one.

Actually, your soul is never born and never dies. Your soul is a part of God and hence lives forever.

However death is defined as the end of the time spent by a soul in one species and birth is defined as soul entering in another species. The ones, who do not meditate on God, will never be able to attain salvation and continue to live in the cycle of birth and death. "The ignorant and oblivious do not serve the true Guru, how will they find salvation? They die only to be reborn over and over again. They continue to be struck down at the door of death" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 115).

What happens after death? Two things can happen after death. First, if you meditate on God and purify your soul by getting rid lust, anger, greed, attachment, and ego, you merge back with God and your cycle of life and death is gone forever. The other one is that if you do not worship God and realize Him, you will be reincarnated. If you were on the right path to God but did not purify your soul within the lifetime you had on the Earth, you will be given more chances in human form to become closer and closer to God. If you have not made any effort to love God and purify your soul, you will end up wandering through the 8.4 million species.

"When the body is filled with ego and selfishness, the cycle of birth and death does not end" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 126). "As long as the tongue does not chant the Name of God, the person continues coming and going in reincarnation, crying out in pain" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 325). "The blind have forgotten the Name of God. The self-willed people are in utter darkness. Their comings and goings in reincarnation do not end; through death and rebirth, they are wasting away" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 19). No one can say which form do you take after death and how many species you have to go through after death. God decides that for you and it is based on how well you live your life.

What determines the escape? The Guru says that only escape from the cycle of death and rebirth is by being an absolute good human being, you must always remember and meditating on God. Our soul after being separated from God has become impure. We have to make it pure enough through meditation so that God can merge us back in Him.

"Those who meditate on God attain salvation. For them, the cycle of birth and death is eliminated" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 11). While awake, eating, studying, remember God. Like you remember someone you love and care for and you just cannot forget your love and your thoughts are fixed on your beloved. Likewise, remember God in your heart and surely God will guide you and help you and you can escape the cycle of death and death. "Those who meditate single-mindedly on the Name of God, and contemplate the teachings of the Guru. Their faces are forever radiant in the Kingdom of God" (Guru Granth Sahib Ji, 28).

Jeevan maran sukh ho-e jinhaa gur paa-i-aa

Sikhism teaches that the world is the temporary abode of the soul. Hymns sung during the Antam ceremony of a Sikh funeral encourage the acceptance of death as being in accordance with the will of the creator, a natural process which is the ultimate occurrence of living. This hymn is from the scripture of the Guru Granth Sahib and is composition by Guru Raam Das, the fourth spiritual master of the Sikhs. It is a reminder that death is ordained for everyone from the time of birth, advising that a profitable life is one lived in remembrance of the divine, and that peace attained by such practice goes with one into the hereafter.

The words to the hymn are sung in the original Gurmukhi, and are spelled out phonetically here.

"Aae-i-aa marann dhuraahu houmai roee-ai ||

From the very beginning death is ordained, but egotism causes one to bewail.

Gurmukh naam dhi-aa-e asthir hoee-ai ||1||

By remembering the Name, through the Guru, one becomes eternal. ||1||

Gur poorae saabaas chalan jaan-i-aa||

Blessed is the Perfect Guru, through whom the way of Death is known.

Laahaa naam su saar sabad samaan-i-aa||1|| rehaao ||

The sublime persons earn the profit of the Lord's Name and in the divine word are absorbed. ||1||Pause||

Poorab likh-ae ddaeh se aa-ae maa-i-aa||

The days of one's life are pre-ordained, they do come to their end, O mother.

Chalan aj ke kaleh dhurahu furamaa-i-aa||2||

One must depart, today or tomorrow, according to the Lord's Primal Order. ||2||

Birthaa janam tinaa jinhee naam visaar-i-aa||

In vain are the lives of those who have forgotten the Lord's Name.

Jooai khaelan jag ke ehu man haar-i-aa||3||

Playing the game of chance, in this world they lose their soul. ||3||

Jeevan maran sukh hoe jinhaa gur paa-i-aa||

In life and in death peace resides with those who attain their Guru.

Naanak sachae sach sach samaa-i-aa||4||12||64||

O Nanak, the true ones are truly absorbed into the True Lord." ||4||12||64||
SGGS||369

Jot milee sang jot reh-i-aa ghaal-daa

Sikhism teaches that the world is the temporary dwelling place of the soul. Hymns sung during a Sikh funeral or Antam ceremony, are a reminder that the soul returns to whence it came. This composition by Guru Arjun Dev, the fifth spiritual master of Sikhism, speaks of the light of the soul merging with the light of infinite divine offering consolation to the bereaved upon a loved one's departure from the earthly realm.

The hymn is sung in the original Gurmukhi. The words are spelled out phonetically here.

"Simar simar daataar manorath poor-i-aa||

Meditating, in contemplation of the great Giver, the heart's desires are fulfilled.

Ichh punnee man aas ga-e visoor-i-aa||

The craving and hopes of the mind are realized, and sorrows are forgotten.

Paa-i-aa naam nidhaan jis no bhaal-daa||

The treasure of the name is obtained after a long search.

Jot milee sang jot reh-i-aa ghaal-daa||

My light merges with the Supreme light, and my labors are over.

Sookh sehaj aanand vutthae tit ghar||

Peacefully I take abode in the house of bliss.

Aavan jaan rehae janam na tehaa mar||

My comings and goings have ended and there is no more birth or death.

Saahib saevak ek ek dristt-aa-i-aa||

The Master and the servant have become one, with no sense of separation.

Gur prasaadh naanak sach samaa-i-aa||21||1||2|| Sudh

By the Guru's grace, Nanak is absorbed in the true Lord." ||21||1||2||Sudh||
SGGS||524

Sooraj kiran milae jal kaa jal hooaa raam

Sikhism teaches a concept that the creator and creation are inseparable and that all creatures are imbued with the light of the divine. Hymns sung during a Sikh funeral offer consolation to the bereaved emphasizing that the light of the soul is absorbed into divine light upon departure from the body.

This composition of Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth spiritual master of Sikhism, likens the relationship of divine light and the light of the individual soul to that of the sun and the ray of a sunbeam.

The hymn is written in the language of Gurbani which is not a spoken language, but is poetic in nature, and corresponds to metered musical scores meant to be sung in the original Gurmukhi. The words are spelled out phonetically here.

"Sooraj kiran milae jal kaa jal hooaa raam||

(As) the sunbeam blends with sunlight and the water drop is absorbed into water becoming saturated,

Jotee jot ralee sanpooran thee-aa raam||

(So) one's light merges with the Supreme Light, and one becomes perfectly complete.

Brahm deesai brahm suneeai eaek eaek vakhaan-ee-ai||

(Once) God is seen and God is heard; only that One is spoken of.

Aatam pasaaraa karanhaaraa prabh binaa nehee jaan-ee-ai||

The supreme soul is the expansive creation is inseparable from the creative God, without whom there is knowledge of no other.

Aap kartaa aap bhugtaa aap kaaran kee-aa||

That one is the creator that one is the consumer and that one is the cause of why everything is.

Binvant naanak sae-ee jaaneh jinhee har ras pee-aa||4||2||

Prays Nanak, they alone understand this mystery who drink of the divine Lord's elixir." ||4||2|| SGGS||846

Oudak samund salal kee saakhiaa nadee tarang samaaveh-gae

Sikhism teaches that death is a natural process of creation ordained by its creator. Upon departure from the physical body the soul returns to merge with the divine just as the body returns to the elements from which it is composed.

In this hymn the author, Kabir, likens the relationship of the soul with the divine to the individual drops of water in the sea and the to the ripples of a stream. Just as the spray of sea foam is an integral part of a wave and current is part of a rippling river, the soul is an inseparable part of the divine.

Sikhism teaches that immortality is achieved in liberation by the enlightened, or realized, soul who is freed from the cycle of birth and death, and needs not be born again into existences. Kabir advises that focusing on the divine, and thus dying to the distractions of the world, is the key to living eternally.

This hymn is sung in the original Gurmukhi. The words are spelled out phonetically here.

"Oudhak samund salal kee saakhiaa nadee tarang samaavehgae||

Like droplets of water in an ocean wave and the ripples of a stream, I am immersed in the divine.

Sunneh sunn miliaa samdarsee pavan roop ho-e jaavehgae||1||

Meeting with the supreme soul, my soul shall become unbiased and pure like air.

Bahur ham kaahae aavehgae||

Why should I come into the world again?

Aavan jaanaa hukam tisai kaa hukamai bujh samaavehigae||1||rehaao||

Coming and going is ordained by divine decree; accordingly I am merged with the divine.

Jab chookai panch dhaat kee rachnaa ai-sae bharam chukaavehgae||

When the issue of five elements perishes my wanderings cease.

Darsan chhodd bha-e samdarsee aeko naam dhiaavehgae||2||

Forsaking various philosophies I see all impartially by meditating on the Name only.||2||

Jit ham laa-ae tit hee laagae taisae karam kamaavehgae||

Whatever I'm attached to and become involved with influences the deeds I do.

Har jee kirpaa karae jo apnee tau gur kae sabad samaavehgae||3||

When the revered Lord is merciful then I merge with the Guru's word. ||3||

Jeevat marhu marhu fun jeevhu punrap janam na hoee||

While yet living die, and in dying to this life be born anew, never to be born again.

Kahu Kabeer jo naam samaanae sunn rehiaa liv soee||4||4||

Says Kabir, whoever is absorbed in meditation of the name remains lovingly affixed in the Absolute Lord." ||4||4|| SGGS||1103