

What are the 'big ideas' in Sikhism?

The word '**Sikh**' means 'disciple', Sikhs follow the writings and teachings of the **Ten Sikh Gurus** (teachers) and **Guru Granth Sahib**, the holy Sikh text.

The first guru, **Guru Nanak Dev Ji** summarised Sikh belief as:

- God is to be remembered at all times.
- People should work hard and honestly
- People should share what they have with the needy.

The key beliefs about God are recorded in the **Mool Mantar**. This opens with '**Ik Ongar**' or '**Ek Onkar**' (**God is one**).

Sikh beliefs are depicted visually in the **Khanda**.

In Sikhism all are **equal** regardless of race, status or gender.
There is no distinction before God.

The last human guru, **Guru Gobind Singh** left the **Guru Granth Sahib** as the spiritual teacher and guide for all. Through it God can be found. He also established the **Khalsa**, the community of committed Sikhs, to fight for the rights of Sikhs in the world, and protect the poor and needy. He gave the khalsa five symbols to represent aspects of faith. These are **Kesh** (uncut hair); **Kangha** (comb); **Kirpan** (sword); **Kara** (bracelet); **Kachera** (short trousers).

Sikhs meet to worship in a **gurdwara** (gateway to the Guru) in which **Guru Granth Sahib** is always central. The gurdwara also contains a **langar** kitchen which welcomes and serves food to all daily.



What do I need to know about Sikhism?

The Sikh religion is the youngest of the major world faiths, originated in the Punjab region of India in the 15th century. It is the fifth largest religion in the world with over 30 million followers worldwide, the majority live in the Punjab, but Sikhs now live in every continent. There are about half million Sikhs in the United Kingdom.

Sikhism is a distinct religion with its own unique scriptures and beliefs. The word Sikh means disciple or student in the Punjabi language. Sikhs are disciples of God who follow the writings and teachings of the ten Sikh Gurus who lived between 1469 and 1708. The first was Guru Nanak Dev. Each following Gurus added to and reinforced Sikh teachings and is believed to have been sent by God to deliver His message. The last guru, Guru Gobind Singh, did not appoint a human successor. Instead, he transferred spiritual authority to the Guru Granth Sahib, the written record of the teaching of the ten gurus and many other spiritual writers. This was to be treated as a living guru and a tangible representation of the divine presence. Worldly leadership of the Sikh community was transferred to the Khalsa, committed Sikh believers initiated through a special ceremony. Their commitment is shown by the wearing of five symbols of faith.

What do Sikhs believe?

Guru Nanak Dev, the first Sikh Guru, reacted against the Hindu faith of his upbringing, in particular the caste system, as well as that of the Muslims in his local community. He taught three fundamental principles of faith:

Remember God at all times. Sikhs believe in one God. He is the same for all people of all religions. He is the creator of the universe (science enhances, not contradicts, this belief). Part of His divine spirit exists in all living things He has created. Sikhism emphasizes daily devotion to God – people should remember God at all times and meditate on His greatness (simran). Although God is far too great for people to understand, remembering Him with love will help bring believers closer to Him with the ultimate aim of being conscious of the working of God in all aspects of his life, and so uniting with God Himself. God has many names, but the most frequently spoken is Waheguru – Wonderful Lord. Daily recitation of this keeps Sikhs focused in life, and moves them closer to God and so salvation. Guru Nanak taught followers the Mool Mantar which summarises the concepts of Sikh belief in God, and opens the Guru Granth Sahib. It translates:

‘There is one God. His Name is Truth.
He is the Creator. He is present throughout His Creation.
He fears none. He hates none. His existence is immortal.
He is not born, nor does He die. He is self-illuminated.
He is realized through the grace of the Guru’.



Ik ongar – God is one – the opening of Mool Mantar

Work hard and honestly Sikhs should live honestly and earn by physical and mental effort while accepting God's gifts and blessings. A Sikh should never engage in any dishonest means of making money. A Sikh should develop positive human qualities which then lead the soul closer to God. A Sikh needs to overcome the five vices of lust, anger, greed, emotional attachment and ego. Sikhs do not advocate fasting, superstitions, ritualism, the caste system, alcohol, smoking or drugs. A Sikh should eat simple food. Most are vegetarian.

Share what you have with the needy. Sikhism teaches service to others, and helping the poor and oppressed. Sikhs are expected to seize every opportunity of helping their fellow-beings and serving them in any way they can, without expecting rewards. Sikhs have a proud heritage of speaking out against injustice and standing up for the defenceless, and greatly values the contribution of those martyrs who died for religious freedom.



The Gurus also taught that people of different races, religions, or gender are all equal in the eyes of God. Sikhism teaches the full equality of men and women. All human beings are equal and are the children of one family with God as their Father. Everyone has the right and obligation to try to improve himself both spiritually and socially without the rigid restrictions of caste. Sikhism emphasizes an ethical life and rejects all forms of rituals such as idol worship, pilgrimages, fasting, and superstitions. Sikhism teaches religious freedom. All people have the right to follow their own path to God without condemnation or coercion.

The ten living gurus are held in very high esteem as bringing the message of God to people. The births and deaths of many are celebrated as festivals. On Guru Nanak's Birthday Guru Granth Sahib is carried through the streets by five men. The festival of Diwali is also celebrated linked to the story of the life of Guru Hargobind.

What is the Guru Granth Sahib?

The Guru Granth was first compiled by the fifth Sikh guru, Arjan, who collected the compositions of Guru Nanak and others. He included any writings that enhanced Sikh teaching, including those of Hindu and Muslims. The final edition by Guru Gobind Singh contains work from 36 authors and uses a number of Punjabi dialects, all written in Gurmukhi script. Sikhs believe people can pray in any language, but the Guru Granth, though translated, is usually read in the original language. Its contents are called the Gurbani which literally means 'from the Guru's mouth'. Sikhs believe that the gurbani is literally the word of God. Guru Arjan chose a martyr's death rather than saving his life by making alterations to the hymns. It contains no narrative prose or commandments. The Guru Granth Sahib has 1430 pages and 5864 shabads (hymns) arranged into 31 ragas (musical groupings). Whatever the size of the book the layout is always be identical.

Guru Gobind Singh told followers he was the last human Guru and that Guru Granth Sahib was now the permanent living Guru for Sikhs. It was to be given honour and respect. In it all answers regarding religion and morality can be discovered. In all gurdwaras and many Sikh homes, the Guru Granth is read every day. No Sikh ceremony is complete unless performed in its presence. On a daily basis, Sikhs receive a hukam in a gurdwara or at home. The hukam is the first hymn on the left hand page when the scriptures are opened at random. These verses are a word from God which will be helpful for that day.



On special occasions, the Granth Sahib is recited non-stop from cover to cover by a string of readers. This is known as an Akhand Path. It is regarded as the highest and noblest ceremony in the Sikh religion, and can be performed on any important occasion. It requires nearly 48 hours to complete the continuous reading.

What is the Khalsa and what are the 5 Ks?

The khalsa was established by Guru Gobind Singh in 1699 when he asked for volunteers to die for the Sikh cause. Five offered to do so, but were instead honoured as the Panj Pyare, the Five Beloved Ones. These were the first members of the new community called the Khalsa. Others were challenged to join them in dedicating themselves to faith in God, the service of others, the pursuit of justice and the values of courage, sacrifice, and equality.. The Guru gave all Khalsa men the name of Singh (lion) as a reminder to be courageous. Women took the name Kaur (princess) to emphasize dignity. It was the Khalsa's role to become the earthly body upholding the Sikh faith in the place of a human guru leader.

Guru Gobind Singh gave the Khalsa a unique identity with five distinctive symbols of purity and courage, known as the Five K's. These are:

Kesh - All body hair is left uncut as a symbol of faith. The dastaar is worn to cover long hair. The most common dastaar is the turban, although other forms include the patka often worn by younger boys. Sikh women may either wear a turban or a chunni, but are not obliged to do so. The dastaar must never be covered. Sikhs have fought for the right to wear dastaar. The turban was a symbol of royalty and dignity. By making it a religious requirement it gave the khalsa high esteem.

Kangha - A small comb affirms its bearer's commitment to society. It is tucked neatly in the uncut hair. As a comb helps remove the tangles and cleans the hair, so the Kanga is a spiritual reminder to clean shed thoughts.

Kara - A steel bracelet, symbolizing strength and integrity. The kara is worn around the wrist and its circular shape reminds Sikhs that God is infinite, without beginning or end (chakkar). Steel is strong and resilient as the human soul should be.

Kirpan – a scimitar sword symbolises the protection of the weak by Sikhs. It is hung near a Sikh's waist with a shoulder strap. Kirpan is a symbol of respect, justice and authority; it is a reminder that Sikhs are warriors. The Kirpan is never used for offensive purposes, and is purely symbolic as recognised in UK law.

Kaccha - loose, white, cotton undergarment symbolising self-control and chastity.



Vaisakhi is the festival celebrating the founding of the Khalsa. The ceremony of initiation into the Khalsa is called the Amrit ceremony or Sikh baptism. Sikhs undertake this when they are ready and understand the commitment involved. The ceremony is conducted by five baptized Sikhs, Panj Pyare, who wear the five Sikh symbols. They prepare the amrit (sweetened holy water) in a round iron-vessel reciting five scriptural hymns as they stir the water with a double-edged sword, called a Khanda. The Amrit is then drunk by the initiation candidates and sprinkled on their eyes and hair. The ceremony concludes with eating the karah parshad. This is a ceremonial pudding made from butter, sugar, and flour.

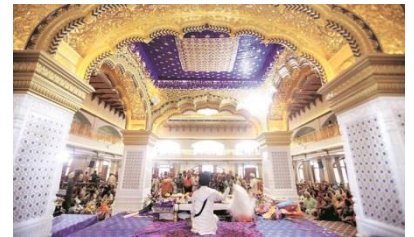


The universal symbol of Sikhism is the khanda, the double-edged sword (also khanda) representing belief in God within an endless circle (the Chakkar). This is flanked by two kirpans, representing secular and spiritual power. This symbol is central on the Nishan Sahib, the saffron coloured triangular flag seen outside all gurdwaras.

What happens in a gurdwara?

Gurdwara means 'gateway to the guru' and any building that houses the Guru Granth Sahib is officially a Gurdwara. Sikhs believe God is everywhere, so can be worshipped anywhere, but communal worship and teaching builds individuals and brings them closer to God. The gurdwara also serves as community centre, school and focus for ceremonies and festivals. There is no particular holy weekday, although many British Sikhs visit the gurdwara at weekends. There are no idols, statues, or religious pictures, because Sikhs worship only God who has no physical form. There candles, incense, bells, or any other ritualistic devices. Although Sikhs show reverence to the Guru Granth Sahib, they are honouring its spiritual content, not the book.

Most gurdwaras have four doors, one facing each direction, to show all are welcome, irrespective of faith. Shoes must be removed on entry and feet washed if dirty. Visitors should cover their heads. No visitor should enter a Gurdwara drunk or carrying alcohol or tobacco. The main hall is the Darbar Sahib. In its centre is a takht - a raised platform with a canopy, chanani. On this lies the Guru Granth Sahib, covered by a cloth when not being read. When being read a chauri will be waved over the scriptures as a sign of respect. The chauri is a ceremonial whisk made from the tail hair of a white horse or yak set in a wooden or silver handle. There will be a smaller room for Guru Granth Sahib to spend the night. Each morning it will be processed to the takht. A light always shines symbolising that the Guru's light never goes out.



Sikhs will usually bow to the Guru Granth Sahib as they enter the Gurdwara and place an offering of food, flowers or money used to help run the Gurdwara and Langar. People sit cross legged on the floor facing Guru Granth Sahib. There are no cushions or seats – all are equal before God. Feet should not be pointed towards the Guru Granth Sahib. Anyone walking round Guru Granth Sahib must do so in a clockwise direction. Men and women usually sit on opposite sides of the takht.

Sikh services include the singing of hymns (kirtan); reading and explaining Guru Granth Sahib (Katha); talks about Sikh history; prayer (ardas); and a hukam. Sikh worship can be led by any khalsa Sikh, male or female. Granthis are people who have studied the Sikh scriptures extensively and so are able to teach. The word Waheguru is often repeated. It must be said sincerely to bring the speaker close to God. Karah parshad is served at the conclusion of the service.

All Gurdwaras have a langar, a community kitchen. Here food is cooked and served by the members of the community to all, irrespective of caste, religion, race or gender. All are welcome, although repeat attenders are asked to help too. Only vegetarian food (or fish or egg) is served, so any visitor, regardless of dietary restrictions, can share the meal which often includes chapati, pulses, vegetables and rice pudding.



Along with these main functions Gurdwaras also serve the Sikh community in many other ways including, libraries of Sikh literature and schools to teach children Gurmukhi and the Sikh scriptures.

Sri Harimandir Sahib (the Golden Temple in Amritsar) is the most important gurdwara of Sikhs, where they fought for the right to worship their way and an original copy of Guru Granth Sahib is kept.

What do Sikhs believe about life and death?

When a Sikh baby is born a special prayer is read and a drop of amrit is placed on the baby's tongue. The baby is later taken to a Gurdwara for a naming ceremony (Nam Karan). Following ardas a hukam is sought. The first letter of the first word of the hymn opened is selected as the first letter of the child's name.

Sikhism emphasizes that marriage and family life are the best way, modelled by many of the ten gurus. Children grow and learn in the security of the home. Children and adults need the company of good people for example, support and guidance. They also learn from the example of saints and martyrs. Children are encouraged to consider joining the Khalsa and the Dastaar Bandi ceremony is a step to adulthood as the individual begins to wear the adult turban. Although men and women are equal in Sikhism some requirements like that of wearing the turban are not compulsory for women. However, many choose to do so.

Sikh marriage, Anand Karaj (blissful union), takes place in a gurdwara. The couple revolve around Guru Granth Sahib four times as the marriage hymns are recited. The ceremony may be performed by any Khalsa Sikh, male or female. Widows or widowers may remarry – the Gurus reacted against the Hindu practice of sati.

Sikhs believe in reincarnation – the cycle of rebirth (samsara). Sikhs believe in karma, a person's actions decide whether their soul can be set loose from Samsara. The soul is a minute part of God that has existed from the time of Creation, and will until it is re-absorbed into Him when fully right with God. This is Mukti. Each soul is subject to death and rebirth as it journeys through 8,400,000 lower life forms and finally receives the gift of human form. Now it can communicate and reason and so appreciate the work of its Creator. It can now make conscious efforts to seek reunion with God. Humans suffer because they choose to forget God and be selfish. Mukti is accomplished by meditation on God and performing acts of service. When Sikhs join the khalsa and truly live out the Sikh faith they may become totally God-centred and so gain Mukti. However, Sikhs believe people have the right to choose to reach God through another faith. At death bodies are taken to the Gurdwara for thanksgiving and then cremated.

Useful resources and websites for teachers and classrooms:

- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/religion/sikhism/>
- <http://www.bbc.co.uk/education/topics/zsjpyrd/resources/1>
- <http://www.littlesikhs.com/>
- <https://www.sikhnet.com/stories>
- <http://www.khalsakids.org/teachers.php>
- http://www.primaryresources.co.uk/re/re_Sikhism.htm
- <http://www.sikhismguide.org/facts.aspx>
- <http://www.kiddiesangat.com/categ>
- <http://www.primaryhomeworkhelp.co.uk/religion/sikhism.html>
- www.sikhnet.com/s/sikhstories
- www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/sikhism/history/index.shtml,
- <http://atschool.eduweb.co.uk/carolrb/sikhism/sikhism1.html>
- www.ngfl.ac.uk/re/welcometothegurdwara.htm and <http://re-xs.ucsm.ac.uk/re/places/> link to virtual visits
- www.ngfl-cymru.org.uk/vtc/ngfl/re/m_parry_carmarthenshire/addoldai/gurdwaraone.html
- www.primaryresources.co.uk/re (go to Sikhism section for lots of PowerPoints and PDF files)
- Folens photo pack on Sikhism; pictures of Gurus
- Replicas of the Five Ks
- BBC Video 'Pathways of Belief'

- Leaders of Religion: Guru Nanak by Dilwyn Hunt
- Seeking Religion Series: The Sikh Experience by Philip Emmett
- Discovering Religions: Sikhism by Sue Penny
- Sikhism: A new approach by Pamela Draycott