If you were to ask a devout Sikh to summarize the ideal way of life, you’d probably hear the slogan *Naam japna, wand ke shakna te dharam dhe kirat karnee*. That is to say (in reverse order): ‘Earning an honest living, sharing one’s blessings with those less fortunate and meditating on the name of God.’ While this phrase is not in the Sikh Scriptures, the *Guru Granth Sahib*, it does capture the sentiment of the teachings well.

*Lead a life of activity,*
*and earn its comforts with honest hard work.*
*Through devoted remembrance meet the Lord,*
*and, O Nanak, all worries are dispelled.* [1]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Gujari, Mahala 5, p. 522)

The central spiritual issue, which has perplexed me for a long time, is: What is this *Naam* and how should we meditate upon it?

In the mid-1970s, when I was a teenager, my father gave me a copy of the *Autobiography of Bhai Sahib Randhir Singh*. This was an English translation, by Dr. Trilochan Singh, of the Punjabi book *Jail Chittian* or ‘Letters from Jail’. Although the description of the hardships endured by Randhir Singh and his fellow patriots during their incarceration for independence activities in India in the early twentieth century were very moving, and mirrored the fate of Nelson Mandela and his companions in South Africa some decades later, I was entranced by the narrative about his spiritual quest as a young man. Randhir Singh took the instruction to meditate on the *Naam* to heart, but wasn’t sure which word he should use for the mantric recitation because God is referred to by a myriad different names in the *Guru Granth Sahib*: Creator, Giver, Lord, Almighty and so on. He was drawn to the popular term *Waheguru*, but confirmation only came with a mystical episode; subsequently he enjoyed deep spiritual experiences, which helped him cope through the trying years that lay ahead.

Being young and impressionable at the time, I went through a brief rosary period. Sadly it did little for me, but I put this down to my lack of commitment; unlike Randhir Singh, I didn’t get up at 2 a.m. to meditate. The topic came back to the fore in the late 1980s, when I went to the Los Alamos National Laboratory in New Mexico, U.S.A., as a post-doc for a few years. I was only 20 miles from a community of European-American Sikhs who practiced meditation seriously, at the Española headquarters of Yogi Harbhajan Singh. Although I rapidly came to the conclusion that the latter was a complete charlatan, was there anything of value in the yogic techniques for an aspiring meditant? I can’t speak from experience, since I was too put off by the Yogi-centred setup to try it, but somehow I don’t think I missed out on much of significance.
More recently, it has finally started to dawn on me that the notions of *Naam* and *Simaran*, or contemplation, as generally expounded within Sikh circles are at odds with *Gurbani* — they can’t have anything to do with the physical recitation of a particular word or phrase! While the beginning of the following hymn by the tailor-Saint Nam Dev might suggest a conventional mantric interpretation, the subsequent lines rule it out:

\begin{quote}
With the mind as my yard-stick and the tongue my scissors,
Measure by measure I’m cutting off death’s noose. [1]
What do I care about caste and what do I care about sub-caste,
When I recite the Lord’s Name day and night. [Refrain]
Even through the chores of dying and sewing,
Without God’s Name I don’t live a moment. [2]
I contemplate and sing the Lord’s praises,
Remembering God every hour of the day. [3]
Just like a silver thread in a golden needle,
Nama’s mind is attached with the Almighty. [4]
\end{quote}

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Aasaa, Bhagat Nam Dev, p. 485)

It doesn’t matter how committed you are, it’s not possible to repeat *Waheguru*, or anything else, every second of the day through human endeavour. Even if you could train your mind to do so while awake, could you guarantee that the process would continue uninterrupted during sleep? No, not without the process becoming akin to one’s breathing or heartbeat; that is, involuntary. The *Naam* and *Simaran* that *Gurbani* talks about, which goes on continually day and night, is something transcendental.

Even those who concede that *Gurbani* is alluding to a spiritual process, rather than a physical one, tend to argue that the repetition of the *Waheguru* mantra is a necessary first step for achieving the hallowed state; as such, meditative practice is seen as being essential to get things started. I’m afraid this doesn’t seem right to me anymore.

\begin{quote}
O my mind, take the shelter of God’s Name. Its contemplation dispels bad thoughts and leads to the state of contentment. [Refrain]
Consider such souls truly blessed, who sing the praises of the Almighty.
Washing away their accumulated sins, they find a place in heaven. [1]
In his final moments, Ajamal obtained an understanding of the Lord. That sublime state, sought by grand-yogis, in an instant did he achieve. [2]
Lacking in merit and devoid of learning, no religious acts could Gaj perform.
Nanak behold the way of God, the gift of tranquillity he gave him. [3]
\end{quote}

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Raamkali, Mahala 9, p. 901)

Two references from Indian mythology, the fables of the ‘sinner’ Ajamal and the ‘arrogant elephant’ Gaj, are used in the second half of this verse to make a point: only the Grace of the Lord, and not years of religious acts or yogic practice, leads to the state of enlightenment, contentment and tranquillity. The citations of Ajamal and Gaj do not indicate that Sikhism accepts that either really existed, but
simply means that a useful lesson can be learnt from the folklore. Indeed, as in Gurbani, the elephant could merely be a metaphor for arrogance, just as a tiny ant is sometimes used to represent humility.

_God is like sugar that is scattered in sand,  
An elephant can’t pick out the sweet grains.  
Kabir says, the Guru has given this sound advice:  
Become like an ant and savour the nectar._ [238]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Slokas, Bhagat Kabir, p. 1377)

The notion that the recitation of _Waheguru_ as a mantra is central to the Sikh spiritual path seems like a gross misconception to me. The word only occurs about a dozen times in the 1430 pages of the _Guru Granth Sahib_, and attaching special significance to one name for God over another is contrary to its teachings. Even if we accept that the use of _Waheguru_ in preference to other names for God is just a convention, will its repeated chanting lead us eventually to enlightenment? I very much doubt it.

_Purity is not obtained by bathing, even if you wash a million times over.  
Tranquillity does not come with silence, no matter how long the meditation.  
Satiety is not achieved through indulgence, even with the wealth of the world.  
Despite countless techniques and practices, not one leads to emancipation.  
How can we perceive the Truth? How can the wall of falsehood be breached?  
It happens in accordance with God’s Will, O Nanak, as it is ordained._ [1]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Japji, p. 1)

The second verse of the first composition, _Japji_, then goes on to discuss God’s Will: everything happens in accordance with it, but it defies description; those who are lucky enough to recognize it become free from the clutches of their ego. Having dismissed some of the most common religious practices as misguided, such as asceticism, pilgrimage and sacred bathing, and ruled out all the others that might be dreamt up, it’s highly unlikely that Guru Nanak would have advocated some variant of his own.

What is the Truth with which Guru Nanak is concerned, and what constitutes the wall of falsehood? He answers this in a short _Sloka_ at the head of the 38 verses of _Japji_:

_The Truth was there in the beginning,  
The Truth has been there throughout the ages.  
The Truth exists even today and,  
O Nanak, the Truth will also exit in the future._ [1]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Japji, p. 1)

The Truth that is being referred to is something which is eternal. Everything else, being transitory, is considered an illusion akin to a dream; that which appears to be real but vanishes on waking. Since all that surrounds us has been in existence for only a finite amount time, be it ourselves, our planet, the galaxies and even the
stuff from which the universe is made (currently estimated to be around 15 billion years old), the Truth must be unlike anything we know. It is this very uniqueness that makes it impossible to describe, since there is nothing in our experience with which it can be meaningfully compared. The declaration of this basic feature, and the associated limitations of description and understanding, form the cornerstone of the Sikh creed: the Mool Mantra.

There is One God, whose name is Truth.
The omnipresent creator, who is without fear and without enmity;
A timeless being, who is not born but is self-existent.
Enlightenment comes through his Grace.

(Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1)

This fundamental statement is reiterated at the start of each chapter and major composition, and its abridged version (Ek Onkaar - Sat - Gurparsaad) occurs in numerous places. The rest of the Guru Granth Sahib is an exposition that expands on this theme in different ways.

A year ago, I was taken aback when a good Sikh friend of mine told me that he’d come to the conclusion that there was no God! While I would have paid little attention to such a claim from someone like Richard Dawkins, my friend was a devout and spiritual man who thought deeply about the message of Gurbani. So, how could he say that? He went on to elaborate that God was simply a metaphor, which stood for all that was transcendental. Although I still have reservations, I’m sympathetic towards the idea. Rather than God making man in his own image, as asserted in the first book of the Bible (Genesis), we tend to visualize God in human terms: presumably he must live somewhere, so we picture a place called heaven; he must have friends and enemies, so we become the chosen people while others feel his wrath; being the ultimate authority, he must expect homage and obedience; and so on. According to Guru Nanak, such worldly attributes of time, space, birth, death, fear, enmity, etc., are not applicable to God. The metaphorical view discourages these preconceptions by emphasizing the transcendental nature of the quest.

The task at hand can be summarized as follows: we seek an eternal Truth, but it is beyond our comprehension because it lies outside the experience of the only reality we know (transient as that might be). While some, understandably, regard this situation as absurd and dismiss the whole notion, others are not so easily put off by its daunting challenge. The problem for those drawn to the spiritual path is figuring out how to proceed.

Ritual prayers, fasts, denominational marks, sacred baths and ostentatious charitable donations.
None of these acts impress the Lord, no matter how sweet the words with which they’re performed. [1]
The contemplation of God’s Name brings tranquillity to the mind.
People seek the Lord through many different ways, but it’s a difficult task and he can’t be found. [Refrain]
Chanting, penance, wandering the globe, extreme austerities and ascension to the highest chakra.

*Such methods find no favour with the Lord, whether they be yogic techniques or Jain practice. [2]*

The ambrosial Name, that priceless praise of God, is obtained by those on whom he showers his Grace.

The Lord bestows this joy in holy company, O Nanak, and such blessed souls live in peace. [3]

(Preferences as per Mahala 5, p. 674)

Although the purpose of the quest is clear — the acquisition of a perpetual state of mental peace, joy and tranquillity — the method by which the necessary enlightenment can be attained is not obvious. Indeed, given the nature of the task, it’s important to realize that this goal cannot be reached by human endeavour. Only if the veil of falsehood is lifted for us will the Truth be revealed; once glimpsed, the illusion of everyday reality loses its power. Thus concludes Guru Nanak, with Gurparsaad.

If enlightenment can only be achieved through God’s Grace, what can we do to encourage this blessing? The answer, I believe, is nothing! As long as you think that certain acts, practices or behaviour will make you more worthy of Grace, you’ve lost the plot. We are after something so priceless, there is no way in which it can be earned; there is nothing we can give in return. All we can do is harbour a heart-felt desire for the invaluable gift.

*Of what use is your meditation, penance, fasting and worship,*
*If in your heart you don’t have the Love of the Almighty? [1]*

*My friends, you should attach your mind with the Creator.*

God is not attained through clever techniques and rituals. [Refrain]

*You should give up your pride and pretensions to impress others;*  
*And relinquish your obsession with lust, anger and your ego. [2]*  
*Instead you fan your ego by making a great show of your piety;*  
*And waste your time in the service of idols and tombstones. [3]*  

*Only through devoted remembrance is God attained, says Kabir;*  
*Only through the innocence of a child does one meet the Almighty. [4]*

(Preferences as per Raaga Gaudi, Bhagat Kabir, p. 324)

But how can we develop a thirst for something that is transcendental? After all, it’s not easy to fall in love without the sense of sight, sound, smell, taste or touch. There is just one possibility: seek inspiration from those rare souls who have been lucky enough to have been blessed with the divine experience.

*O mother, I have obtained the treasure of God’s Name.*
*My mind has ceased its hankerings and finally come to rest. [Refrain]*  
*The draw of illusion has left the body and divine knowledge has emerged.*  
*Greed and attachment can ensnare no longer, I’m absorbed with the Lord. [1]*  
*The uncertainty of lifetimes lifted when I obtained the gem of God’s Name.*  
*All the desires vanished from my mind and perpetual bliss settled within. [2]*
The one on whom the Lord showers his Grace sings the praises of the Almighty.
Nanak says, rare are the blessed souls who acquire this type of wealth. [3]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Baasant, Mahala 9, p. 1186)

Given the scarcity of enlightened individuals, finding such holy company is not an easy job. Sadly, the search is also fraught with danger. While there is no threat from the saint we seek, the problem is one of avoiding the many charlatans who are only too eager to exploit the unwary. Even though the warning signs are usually obvious, blind faith tends to take over and victims of spiritual fraud abound. A simple checklist should include the following questions. Is the person perennially content, or does he or she succumb to lust, anger, greed, undue attachment and ego? Is a blissful state maintained under trying circumstances? Is the company of the honest, humble and poor preferred, or is much more interest shown towards the rich, famous and powerful?

Sikhs can eliminate the risk of falling prey to charlatans by seeking spiritual inspiration directly from the Guru Granth Sahib, because it was composed and compiled by the (enlightened) founders. The Sikh Gurus also included the writings of some contemporary saints from various religious and social backgrounds, such as Kabir, Farid, Nam Dev, Ravi Das and Trilochan, to emphasize that the Truth with which they were concerned was universal as well as eternal. Despite being in this unique and privileged position with regard to their scriptures, most still want a saint they can see and touch in person and, thereby, lay themselves open to the potential pitfalls which that entails. Since our goal is transcendental, the lack of human form is irrelevant. If the physical presence of a sage guaranteed salvation, everyone with whom Guru Nanak came into contact would have become a saint. It didn’t work for his eldest son, Siri Chand, for example, who egotistically assumed that it was his rightful inheritance to succeed his father; when his expectations were dashed, because Guru Nanak chose the humble Bhai Lehna over him, he went off in a huff and set up his own ascetic sect (completely at odds with Guru Nanak’s teachings). Likewise, Prithi Chand, the eldest son of the fourth Guru, Ram Das, was a source of much grief; and what about Ram Rai, Dhir Mul, and the people who tortured and killed the fifth and ninth Gurus, Arjan and Teg Bahadur? What we’re after is not a matter of having flesh and blood communion with a saint, but one of deriving inspiration from their utterances about that rarest of sublime experiences.

If I discover a curiosity, or gain some particular insight, or just buy a gadget that enthralls me, I get excited and want to tell my friends about it. When people fall in love, or have their hearts broken, or go through other deep emotions, they are often driven to setting their feelings to poetry and song. The contents of the Guru Granth Sahib make most sense when viewed in this light: its saintly authors are trying to give expression to the most profound of experiences, but it’s difficult to capture in words.

Oh what bliss. To whom can I describe this state?
I have become ecstatic with delight on catching sight of the Lord; my mind
is filled with joy and sings his praises. [Refrain]
I am awestruck on seeing the Wondrous One, the Blesser is everywhere. 
I drink the priceless nectar of God’s Name but, like a mute, I can only convey the taste with a contented smile. [1]
Just as when some stop their breathing, the air flow can’t be perceived. 
So a person within whom God becomes resplendent, their inner state cannot be described with words. [2]
The various techniques discussed by people, can all be learnt by study. 
But my beloved Lord, the dispeller of worry, appeared inside my heart from within; it’s hard to say how it could be. [3]
The undefinable, formless and eternal Lord; boundless beyond measure. 
Nanak says, only those enjoined with the ever-youthful Lord can ever know about this state of pleasure. [4]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Saarang, Mahala 5, p. 1205)

To add the appropriate emotional emphasis to the words, the poetic verses of the _Guru Granth Sahib_ were set to _Raagas_, or modes of Indian classical music, designed to generate ‘mood’. _Gurbani_ was primarily intended to be sung as hymns in serene tones, rather than being read as a long recitation. Having created a suitably atmospheric backdrop, the hope is that the words will act like the arrows of Cupid and instill in the listener a thirst that can’t be quenched without obtaining the Lord’s Grace.

That would seem to have been the theory, but modern practice has veered a long way from it. The singing of _Gurbani_, or _Kirtan_, along classical lines is now rare and hurried, as congregations complain they can’t understand it and want easy sing-along tunes. Complete non-stop recitations of the _Guru Granth Sahib_, called _Akhand Paaths_, carried out by a relay team of readers over about 48 hours, have sprung up and are very common; many are performed simultaneously and several can be strung end-to-end. I think this invention shows great disrespect to _Gurbani_, as we use it to make a display of our devotion by engaging in the sort of meaningless acts against which it counsels! Using a topical analogy, I’d say that the Sikh Gurus left us with a simple diet of wholesome food to provide fitness and good health; instead we’ve turned to junk fast food that is low in spiritual value and high in superstition and ritual. The resultant obesity and ill-health is clear to see and growing.

Before concluding, I’d like to make some further comments regarding _Kirtan_. This practice is the closest that the Sikh Gurus came to advocating any particular technique. Its rationale was discussed above, but its status as the method of choice is also straightforward to understand: it is far easier to grab somebody’s attention, especially our own mind’s, with the help of music than it is by a straight recitation. You don’t even have to know the language of the lyrics to become enchanted with a song; just the tune can be enough. Indeed, if we consider the style of singing used by Guru Nanak and Guru Arjan themselves, which can be ascertained thanks to the likes of Bhai Avtar Singh’s family whose heritage in _Gurbani Sangeet_ can be traced back in an unbroken line to that early period, it was so slow that the
words were almost impossible to make out unless you already knew them. While I’m sure that this shortcoming was rectified by the Sikh Gurus also discussing the words and message of the composition with the audience, it was Raagas through which they gave it expression with the appropriate emotion. Some of the Raagas and their combinations assigned in the Guru Granth Sahib are not found in any earlier texts, which suggests that their origin lies with the Sikh Gurus. It’s sad, therefore, that we don’t make the effort to appreciate classical Kirtan but demand ‘easy’ tunes. A few dedicated souls such as Bhai Kultar Singh and Bhai Baldeep Singh, who are the son and great-nephew of Bhai Avtar Singh respectively, and Prof. Surinder Singh are bucking the trend towards dumbing down; my heart-felt gratitude to them.

I began this article with the question of Naam, and have to confess that I still have no idea of what it is. I have learnt that this knowledge can only be acquired with God’s Grace, but that the lucky few to be so blessed don’t have the words to describe it. In any case, it’s a far cry from the conventional mantric viewpoint usually preached! I guess the misconception stems from people interpreting the vocabulary of the Guru Granth Sahib too literally, and not taking due account of the fact that Guru Nanak had to use concepts and phrases with which his audience was familiar in order to explain his message; meditational terms were used for the benefit of yogis, agricultural ones for farmers, nautical references for fisherman, and so on. The way to reduce the risk of misunderstandings, and the construction of superstitions, is to consider hymns in their entirety and to make sure that the interpretation fits in with Gurbani as a whole. Meditation in Sikhism is not something that is done to become blessed, but it’s what happens automatically if we are ever lucky enough to be the recipients of the Lord’s Grace.

I become attached by what I see. How can I meet you eternal Lord?
Bless me and put me on the right path. Let holy company be my support. [1]
How can we traverse the turbulent illusion of the world?

The enlightener of Truth is the boat to ferry us safely across. [Refrain]
The illusion shakes us like a breeze. Only God’s saints remain unmoved.
They stay aloof from joy and sorrow. The Lord himself looks after them. [2]
The illusion engulfs all like a snake. Burning with ego like a moth to a flame.
God defies every sanctification. Only with Grace is enlightenment found. [3]
I wandered sad seeking a gem. A priceless jewel not obtained by any means.
Within me was this gem. Its glory revealed when the Lord lifted the veil. [4]
Whoever partakes savours its taste. Like a mute who’s mind fills with awe.
I can see the Bliss everywhere. Servant Nanak is now lost in God’s praise. [5]

(Guru Granth Sahib, Raaga Bilaawal, Mahala 5, p. 801)