

Guru Nanak becomes a teacher

A Sikh story

Key Ideas: teachings of Nanak, equality, ideas about God, leaders

A young man named Nanak lived in India many years ago. He was born in a village in Punjab called Talwandi. His father kept the accounts of the chief man of the village and Nanak was trained to follow in his father's footsteps.

Nanak was devoted to his religion. He spent many hours meditating and was not interested in business matters. His father worried about Nanak, and sent him to live with his sister Nanaki and her husband some miles away in the hope that he might change his ways. There Nanak looked after the accounts of the village headman very carefully but he was not really interested in being an accountant. He did not want this to be his life's work. He married, had two sons and was very happy, but he was still restless and looking for something more than just balancing the books.

One day Nanak had an experience which changed his life and the lives of many other people. Early every morning Nanak bathed in the river near the village. One day he didn't return home. His family and friends feared the worst and thought he must have drowned. The headman ordered a careful search to be made. The river was dragged but no trace of Nanak could be found.

After three days Nanak reappeared looking as if nothing had happened to him. Everyone was still worried, though, because he spoke to no one, not even his sister. Eventually he broke his silence but his words bewildered the villagers and his family even more. He said:

'There is no Hindu,
there is no Muslim,
so whose path shall I follow?
I will follow God's path.
God is neither Hindu nor Muslim.'

This was a strange thing to say. Both Hindus and Muslims lived in the village, and they were confused. Nanak then told everyone that he had been taken to the heavenly court and God had commanded him to become his messenger.

From that day he began teaching and was always called Guru Nanak. A guru is a person who helps people to know God for themselves. He taught them that God is present in everyone and that if people meditate they will discover the truth of this message for themselves. Nanak taught that there was only one God who was neither male nor female but had created all life, men and women, animals and plants. There were no important people who deserved to be honoured and no people who should be despised. Everyone was equal. God lived in every heart, in the Hindu and the Muslim. God was not limited to being the God of any particular religion. This was something new.

Guru Nanak had a friend called Mardana. He was a good musician but was very poor and had no instrument so Guru Nanak's sister, Nanaki, gave Mardana a rebeck. It was similar to a lute and had strings which Mardana plucked with his fingers. Guru Nanak and his friend set out on a number of long journeys which took them even beyond India. Wherever they went Guru Nanak would put his message into poetry and Mardana would play a tune. In this way people could easily remember what Guru Nanak taught them.

Many people followed Guru Nanak, rich and poor, good and bad. The good, kind people followed him because they wanted to know God themselves. Other people followed him because they were discontented with the kind of lives they had been living. Eventually, when Guru Nanak and his friend were too old to continue their journeys they settled in a small town which Guru Nanak built. He called it Kartarpur, the city of the Creator. People now came to him and many lived near him in the town.

These men and women who followed Guru Nanak's teachings came to be called Sikhs, the word in Punjabi for disciple. Today there are millions of Sikhs world-wide.