

## Healthy Ageing Policy Commission

Answers to questions following the meeting with the Birmingham Faith Leaders Group

### 1. What does 'healthy ageing' and 'ageing well' mean to your religion? What, if any, are specific faith dimensions to healthy/good ageing?

- Idea that the body houses the 'spirit' – *jyot, atma* – which is timeless, ever youthful; the *man* (mind) has capacity to make positive and negative choices (influenced by internal drives, social nurture and conditions) which contribute to health/ill health of body and spirit
- Dis-ease of spirit is when human being and social environment are driven/consumed by *haumai* – self centredness – and accompanying traits, affecting our inward inclinations and quality of social interactions and expectations. *Haumai* is part of our human chemistry ('*haumai dheerag rog hai, daru bhi is maahi*') – by recognising/controlling it we allow spirit (and our physical, mental, emotional etc systems) to better grow and flourish through the life span.
- Idea therefore that while the body with age can become frail, the spirit can remain fresh through proper care, attention, love
- Dharam or faith can be seen as a holistic tradition (with an ethos/practices/institutions/traditions) whose focus is to nurture and strengthen the spirit for individual and social good
- Dharam helps one to identify, recognise and take steps to build immunity/defences to guard against deterioration from *haumai*, and to nurture self and others through values which support holistic individual and social wellbeing
- There are medical, technical, mechanical solutions to ill health from the ageing process. Beyond this, the Sikh faith tradition draws attention to:
  - 1) social solutions (spiritual values underpinning social interactions, importance of intergenerational family and community life, practice of selfless service, compassion and care, community spirit)
  - 2) more subtle solutions (assisting wellbeing through meditateness and prayer; effects of giving and experiencing love, attention, humility, courage, wisdom, of respecting and preserving human dignity whatever one's cultural, social, religious background; the value and impact of *sangat* – i.e. the co-presence of others; the healing power of attitudes such as thankfulness, acceptance, patience)
- Sikh tradition emphasises the importance of '*bhavana*' – the underlying dispositions, values, intrinsic quality of thought and feeling behind our thoughts and actions (without this faith practices can remain superficial, meaningless, hypocritical). This is important in how we nurture the young, nurture the self, manage the ageing process, care for the elderly. Not paying lip-service to values but making them felt in a tangible way, even though they are intangible, invisible, cannot be measured or assessed in ways that conventional medical care can be.
- A significant factor of physical and mental ill health in the ageing process is loneliness. Sikh tradition provides some models for active community-centred, family spirited living to overcome

social isolation and to give individuals a sense of social value – e.g. elderly can feel a sense of their own social worth to others. That being said, isolation can be felt by individuals amidst the traditional Asian family context, where there is lack of understanding, dialogue, burdens of day to day duties, negative excesses of cultural tradition without the spiritual dimension – hence the value of specifically exploring faith and supporting work of value-led faith institutions in multicultural Britain.

- Sikh tradition, where the faith is fully practiced, also promotes a generally healthy lifestyle – Excessive eating and sleeping are not good for health and prevent an individual from living an active life. Also abstaining from nicotine, alcohol, intoxicants, meat consumption, engaging in daily work, dignity in daily labour
- Other practices, such as daily meditation, prayer, singing, being musical, serving others can be seen to contribute to lifelong wellbeing.
- Sikh spirituality is based on constant God awareness (Naam simran) while living an active life of a householder. Sikh spiritual progress and well-being can be seen to revolve around udham - timely initiative and action this gives the Sikh the will power to act when his or her duty or righteous conduct (dharam) demands it.
- According to Sikh teachings, the goal of human life is achievable here and now and at any stage in life, without waiting for the hereafter. Indeed, the total stress of Sikh thought is on this moment, this breath, which should not be wasted. The hands and feet remain active while the mind remains focused on God consciousness.  
The Guru's teaching is that this is possible while living an active life.
- A Sikh is prepared for the challenges to be faced in all stages of life.
- The positive, life affirming spirit of chardhi kalla has produced a long line of great elderly Sikhs in the Sikh tradition, who showed unyielding courage against impossible odds. Useful reference is lifestyle of marathon runner, Fauja Singh, the oldest marathon runner in the world who himself is a Sikh.
- The Guru Granth Sahib (eternal Guru of the Sikhs) states that one who is born will ultimately die – thus it is a natural process to be undergone with dignity and honour.
- Similarly, taking guidance from the Guru Granth Sahib, if one maintains purity of thought, action and deed – and harbours no vengeance or anger towards others, then this can protect one from many ailments and diseases.
- There are four main stages of life: childhood, youth, middle age and old age. It is important for individuals to practise faith throughout all these four stages for healthy ageing.
- Married life and extended family (grishti jeevan or a householder's life) is conducive for healthy ageing. Positive support is received from one's partner and active social engagement remains with one's surrounding extended family.

## **2. To what extent are elders included in the life of your religious community?**

- Whilst there are many general social forces contributing to the isolation/neglect of elders even in Sikh populations, the institutions of family and Gurudwara create a practical context for them to be positively included.
- Scope which must be better harnessed to better listen to elders, enable them to reminisce, relive or re-experience aspects of their earlier lives, or to engage more with youngsters – all practices which are seen to enable one to age well, remain youthful in spirit, revive or be a tonic to one's wellbeing. Also provision of services such as massage, gentle exercise, gardening.
- Sikhs, who have lived their lives according to Sikh teachings, are likely to remain active to a very advanced age. It is important that their way of life is respected and they are allowed to remain in an environment in which their daily routine is not disturbed.
- Gurbani (Guru's Word) constantly reminds the devotee about the aging process and the urgency for the human mind to focus on the Timeless Creator Being. A sense of God awareness also gives the individual a sense of freedom from the worries of the aging process and hope in advanced age. Elders are encouraged to participate fully in life.
- The fear of death is replaced by equanimity and blissful contentment. Those who have faith in God's Will (Hukam Razaaee) are not afraid of death. Says Kabir, "Death, of which men are afraid, gives me nothing but joy. It is through the gate of death that one may unite with the Lord of Bliss. SGGS p.1365)

## **3. Turning now to considering 'responsibility' for healthy ageing and /or ageing well, what are and what should be the balance between the various religious communities / the individual members of those communities and / or the state or other community groups taking responsibility for healthy ageing?**

- Need to identify and evolve good practice at all levels of the spectrum. Idea of shared responsibility. Role of community organisations to foster a grassroots culture of healthy ageing and care of elderly, beginning with the transformation of individuals and general culture of social care and interaction. Role of state to research, recognise and materially/financially enable models of good practice. Avoid an 'us and them' perspective, build opportunities to share insights, dialogue and culture of cooperation.

## **4. Are there any specific faith elements that the commission should deliberate?**

- The issue of ageing in multicultural Britain can be viewed, in a limited way, as posing challenges and potential obstacles. An understanding of the faith dimension, in terms of values, ethos, examples of good practice, can show how the phenomenon of a multifaith Britain can in fact help to identify potential solutions. Nishkam as an organisation is keen to demonstrate how, whilst grounded in a specific faith and cultural context, its core 'ethos' and 'values' may be transferred to other cultural and social contexts to build helpful 'models' for other communities to emulate.
- Important faith elements include the valuable social, caring and selfless dimension of faith community life; the more subtle dimensions of faith practice (prayerfulness, music, role of meaningful ritual); importance of intergenerational interaction – children and elderly.

- Many of the current population of the Sikh elderly are part of what could be a 'lost generation' who were not able to connect in a wholesome way to their faith tradition (e.g. through various upheavals of migration, life as a minority, managing cultural differences in the host country, confronting economic and material challenges). Hence the need for the commission to consider the positive benefits of supporting both young and old to connect in healthy and positive ways to their traditions through education and the work of grassroots projects and institutions.
- There is hope for all during all stages of life to return to the path of righteous and truthful conduct.
- There are constant reminders in the Sikh teachings that no time must be wasted and one should start God remembrance (Naam simran) from the earliest possible age.
- It is said that those who follow the Guru's path never age (Gurmukh budhay kadday nahi..); they remain active and positive in a spirit of unyielding courage to the end.
- Many elderly Sikhs came from the villages of Punjab, in northern India. Generally they have a poor understanding of the English language. This is particularly true in the case of women. It is important therefore that effective communication is established and maintained between the patient and the health professional.
- Cultural sensitivity is very important to appreciate - gender appropriate staff must be used for nursing care involving handling, close contact with the client, changing, bed baths, treatment and examination of a personal and delicate nature and any other procedures that may require body exposure.
- Amritdhari Sikhs (male or female Sikhs who have taken and maintained the Sikh Baptism) will have particular needs to maintain their code of discipline and this should be discussed with them. They should not be asked to be separated from their five articles of faith: kesh (hair), kangha (wooden comb), kirpan, kashehra (special shorts) and kara (iron bangle). If for some reason this is absolutely necessary it should be discussed with them beforehand. Sikhs who maintain their hair unshorn need to care for their hair. If the patients are unable to care for their hair themselves, this must be discussed with them or their relatives and they should be assisted as necessary.
- At the time of death, scripture and prayer are appropriate. Death is not viewed as a loss, but an opportunity to join with God more fully. Many wish to have sacred hymns recited. Following death, it is important for the five articles (listed above) to remain with the body. If possible, allow the family to prepare the body according to Sikh traditions. Cremation is done as soon after death as possible.