

The Ten Stages of Human Life

In this month's article, we explore Guru Nanak Sahib Ji's short but astute observation of the human life cycle (Sri Guru Granth Sahib, Ang 137). In the shabad, Guru Sahib shows us how, as time passes, our lives are wasted in the entanglements of each phase of life and concludes by showing us how to make it a fulfilling and meaningful one instead.

The first four stages: In these stages, Guru Nanak Sahib outlines how childhood passes. In the first stage, the baby loves his mother's milk; the most basic need of a newborn baby to survive. In the second stage, the baby begins to recognize his parents and develops a bond with them. He learns to associate them with food, comfort, and love. In the third, the child becomes aware of his siblings - brothers, sisters-in-law and sisters. He learns to interact with them and develop social skills. Fourthly, the love of play awakens; the child begins to enjoy playing with toys and exploring his surroundings. This is a time of great learning and discovery.

ਪਹਿਲੈ ਪਿਆਰਿ ਲਗਾ ਥਣ ਦੁਧਿ ॥ ਦੂਜੈ ਮਾਇ ਬਾਪ ਕੀ ਸੁਧਿ ॥ ਤੀਜੈ ਭਯਾ ਭਾਭੀ ਬੋਬ ॥ ਚਉਥੈ ਪਿਆਰਿ ਉਪੰਨੀ ਖੇਡ ॥

Pehle pyar lga than dudh. Dujе maye bap ki sudh. Tije bhya bhabhi beb. Chauthе pyar uppani khed.

First, the baby loves mother's milk; second, he learns of his mother and father. third, his brothers, sisters-in-law and sisters; fourth, the love of play awakens.

Fifth to eighth stages: In these stages, the child becomes a youth and soon an adult. Guru Sahib outlines the desires and entanglements that come in this phase. In the fifth stage, the human runs after food and drink characterizing the desire for pleasure. However, in focusing on these, he neglects spiritual sustenance. The sixth stage is characterized by strong sexual desire where he is willing to break social norms in order to satisfy these. In the seventh stage, the human is swept by the desire to gather wealth, material possessions and status. He accumulates wealth and dwells in his house but in striving for them he can become obsessed with obtaining these and neglect his relationships with others. The eighth stage is characterised by anger and frustration. He may become hostile and aggressive, and damage his relationships with others. In his all-consuming wrath, he not only hurts others but also himself.

ਪੰਜਵੈ ਖਾਣ ਪੀਅਣ ਕੀ ਧਾਤੁ ॥ ਛਿਵੈ ਕਾਮੁ ਨ ਪੁਛੈ ਜਾਤਿ ॥ ਸਤਵੈ ਸੰਜਿ ਕੀਆ ਘਰ ਵਾਸੁ ॥ ਅਠਵੈ ਕ੍ਰੋਧੁ ਹੋਆ ਤਨ ਨਾਸੁ ॥

Punjve khaan pian ki dhat. Chiven kaam na puche jat. Satve sanj kiya ghar vas. Athve krodh hoya tan naas.

Fifth, he runs after food and drink; sixth, in his sexual desire, he does not respect social customs. Seventh, he gathers wealth and dwells in his house; eighth, he becomes angry, and his body is consumed.

The last 2 stages of life: In the ninth stage of life, after being ravaged by attachments and desires, the human finds his hair has turned gray and breathing becomes laboured. He is physically weak and fatigued. This is a time of preparation for death. In the tenth stage, the human dies, and his body is cremated. His ashes are then scattered or buried.

ਨਾਵੈ ਧਉਲੇ ਉਭੇ ਸਾਹ ॥ ਦਸਵੈ ਦਧਾ ਹੋਆ ਸੁਆਹ ॥ Nave dhaule ubhe saah. Dasve dadha hoya suaah.

Ninth, he turns grey, and his breathing becomes labored; tenth, he is cremated, and turns to ashes.

CONCLUSION: Guru Sahib ends the shabad by alluding to the fleeting nature of life where even our names are soon forgotten. What then can we do to transcend worldly attachments and lead a purposeful life? Guru Sahib points us to the need of a Guru - the light that guides us through the darkness of this world and dispels ignorance. The Guru guides us on how to manage our vices and desires, and replace these with virtues. In the end, therefore, it is not how long we live, but how we live. If we follow the Guru's teachings and seek a bond and union with Waheguru by living a virtue-led life, our lives will be meaningful and fulfilling. May we seek this bond with Waheguru as soon as possible.

ਨਾਨਕ ਮਨਮੁਖਿ ਅੰਧੁ ਪਿਆਰੁ ॥ ਬਾਝੁ ਗੁਰੁ ਡੁਬਾ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥੨॥ Nanak manmukh andh piar. Bajh guru duba sansar.

O Nanak, the self-willed manmukhs love the darkness. Without the Guru, the world is drowning. ||2||