



One Sikh's quest for spirituality melds surprisingly well with his tough-as-nails job in international business.

The entrepreneurial Spirit

BY LAWRENCE GOODMAN (MFAW '08)

When he's not working, Sada Sat Simran Khalsa plays with his musical group, the Chardi Kalaa Jatha, which travels around the world performing at temples of the Happy Healthy Holy Organization (3HO). Above, Sada Sat (seated at center) sings and plays the harmonium with Jugat Guru Singh Khalsa (left), while Hari Mander Jot Singh Khalsa (right) plays the tabla, or drums.

For Sada Sat Simran Khalsa (IBA '08), the day begins at 3:30 a.m. with a cold shower. "It activates the blood flow and gets your heart pumping," he says.

At his home in Espanola, N.M., he then meditates for an hour. After this, it's two and half hours straight of Kundalini yoga, a rigorous set of poses and stretches designed to awaken dormant psychic or cosmic energy that's thought to lie at the base of the spine.

At 6:30, Sada Sat eats breakfast – always vegetarian – and then spends an hour or two reciting bani, mantras he chants. After all this, he says, he feels he can live "at a higher center. It's completely blissful."

But the rest of the day Sada Sat spends haggling. An entrepreneur, he is starting an organic baby clothing company using cotton imported from India. However peaceful his mornings may be, he often goes on to spend his day cajoling, arguing and often outright screaming.

"You have to act tough, show your feathers," says this spiritual seeker. "That's just business. I won't let people rip me off."

Khalsa, 27, is an adherent of Yogi Bhajan, an Indian-born Sikh guru who emphasized what his followers call the "3H's" – healthy, happy, holy. Like traditional Sikhism, Bhajan's version sees no conflict in spiritualism and materialism.

"We have to be in tune with ourselves, but we can't just run away into a cave" is how Sada Sat explains it. In many ways, his life's quest is to find the right balance between his peaceful early-morning state of mind and the harried, brass knuckles-business style that consumes his working day. "We make business part of our spiritual practice," he says. "The spiritual and temporal become one."

Sada Sat's parents were white, American born and Protestant. But they became swept up in the countercultural movement of the 1960s, and, according to their son, found Yogi Bhajan's teachings perfectly in accord with their own hippy families. Bhajan, a former customs inspector at the Delhi airport, came to the United States in 1968, starting a spiritual commune in a Los Angeles garage. Sada Sat's parents met him two years later, at which time he had built headquarters for his religion on a 40-acre ranch in Espanola. His group was called 3HO—the Healthy Happy Holy Organization.

Traditional Sikhism does not advocate yoga or vegetarianism, and most of Bhajan's followers were Americans, not Indians. In a 1977 article, *Time* magazine labeled it "synthetic Sikhism." Over the years, Bhajan, who died in 2004, was accused of running a cult, exploiting women for his own sexual needs, and enriching himself at the expense of his members. But Bhajan was also invited to meet with the Pope, two archbishops of Canterbury, and the Dalai Lama. He was a substantial contributor to both the Democratic and Republican parties, and when he died in 2004, New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson ordered flags flown at half-staff in the Yogi's honor.

"Call it what you like," Sada Sat says, "but he saved many people from their own neuroses and habits and gave a technology for us as human beings to have an experience of awareness. As a community our commitment is pure and steadfast."

When Sada Sat was a teenager, his parents sent him to Miri Piri Academy, a boarding school in India that was then at the foot of the Himalayas, to study Bhajan's teachings. There were hundreds of kids at the school from all over the world, and they awoke every morning at five o'clock to meditate. They also trained physically, performing calisthenics and learning to march in unison. But there were also the same courses you'd find in any American school – science, English and math – along with classes on the Hindi language and Indian history.

The school was soon moved to the Indian state of Punjab, a predominantly Sikh area. The school was in the town Amritsar, right along the Pakistani border, which even today is the site of intense fighting between the Pakistani army and various tribal and militant Islamist groups.

"We saw a lot of military out there," recalls Sada Sat. He says the school stressed one of Bhajan's primary principles – selfless service. All students were expected to help cook and clean, in this way giving of themselves fully to the community.

Sada Sat stayed in the area after graduating, going to a nearby city to attend college. But by "college," he means something very different than we do in the United States. He lived in the house of a guru, receiving lessons on religion, yoga and the sacred Sikh musical tradition of chanting. He actually got his degree in vocal music, which involves, he says, "learning how to manipulate a feeling through sound."

He wound up with a degree in classical Indian music, but found when he returned to live in this country that it was not recognized in the United States. In 2005, he undertook an individual studies program at Goddard intending to study further Indian music. Instead, he wound up focusing on Indian agriculture.

"I have a lot of musical friends who are farmers," he says. "They started telling me about their problems." He had long been interested in film and now merged it with his commitment to social justice to make a documentary about the hardships endured by Indian farmers. His film documented unhealthy working conditions for farmers and the pollution caused by unsafe farming practices.

In the process of completing his project, Sada Sat got to know many Indian farmers producing organic cotton.

"There's a huge organic cotton movement happening in India right now," he says. In 1997, along with his wife, Guru Das Kaur Khalsa, he founded Acha Bacha. The company aims to import fine, 100 percent organic cotton linens, blankets and clothing for children, with designs created by Guru Das. He is also part of a three-man musical group, the Chardi Kalaa Jatha, which travels around the world performing at 3HO temples.

Sada Sat, who wears a turban and doesn't cut his hair or shave, splits his time between India and New Mexico. He says he finds it hard to fit in completely in either country. "It's hard here in the United States," he says. "We look different and have a totally different culture, but then we go to India and stand out because we're white."

He sums up his personal philosophy like this: "Live in your higher center, beyond pain and suffering or comfort and ecstasy. Live above your animal instincts, fulfilling your needs without living for your needs." ☺