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3HO KUNDALINI YOGA AND SIKH DHARMA

Kundalini Yoga in 3HO/Sikh Dharma is regarded as an essential spiritual practice. It involves a multitude of meditation sets that include various breathing techniques, body postures and movements, hand positions, mental and devotional foci, and reverent chanting – with each set intended to transform a specific aspect of a person’s physical, emotional, and spiritual makeup. Following the direction of Yogi Bhajan, members of Sikh Dharma are also involved in relatively traditional Sikh beliefs and practices, and regard themselves as orthodox Sikhs. This connection of Kundalini Yoga to Sikhism has come under criticism by certain Punjabi Sikhs and western critics. In light of these concerns, this paper will clarify key features of the practice, theory, transformative processes, and ideals of 3HO Kundalini Yoga, attending especially to questions about the possible connections and significance of it to traditional Sikhism.

1. Introduction¹

In 1968, Yogi Bhajan (Harbhajan Singh Puri) (1929–2004) emigrated from New Delhi to California, with a brief stop-over in Toronto, where he began to teach Kundalini Yoga, initially to Los Angeles area hippies through the East West Cultural Center, and then at the Alhambra and North Valley YMCAs. Formerly a customs inspector in India, as well as yoga teacher, Yogi Bhajan immediately became popular in southern California, and his influence soon spread. In 1969, he established the tax-exempt ‘3HO’ educational organization – now called the 3HO Foundation – that was intended to promote the health, happiness, and holiness of its members by introducing an alternative life-style that promoted nutrition, Sikh socio-moral values, and a special focus on the practice of Kundalini Yoga.

The first 3HO Kundalini Yoga ashram had its beginnings in Los Angeles in 1970 and was formally established in 1972. By 1997, there were 110 3HO Kundalini Yoga centers throughout North America and Europe, and there were over 200 in 28 countries by 1995. In 1994, Yogi Bhajan established the International Kundalini Yoga Teachers Association to oversee teaching standards and propagate the practice. In 2011, there were 157 teacher trainers and 1382 teachers in North America listed on the Association website.²

Paralleling this development of 3HO Kundalini Yoga was the establishment of Sikh Dharma (previously Sikh Dharma Brotherhood) as a religion in the United States in 1973, after some 3HO students began to convert to this tradition following the visit

of 84 of them to New Delhi and Amritsar in 1971. That year, the Akal Takhat in Amritsar authorized Yogi Bhajan to establish a Sikh ministry as the ‘Siri Singh Sahib’ (exalted Lord Singh), and in 1974 it granted him the honorific ‘Bhai Sahib’ – an ancient title of veneration. Although this appointment and these honors have come under criticism in some Sikh circles,³ supporters claim they made Yogi Bhajan a leading figure in Sikh ministry to the West, with the authority to perform initiatory, marriage, ministerial, and final rites for Khalsa Sikhs.

Following the direction of Yogi Bhajan, Sikh Dharma members became involved in relatively traditional Sikh beliefs and practices, including Sikh initiation (*Amrit Sanskar*), participating in regular dawn meditation (*Sadhana*), wearing Sikh attire (*Bana*), and celebrating Sikh holy days. They regard themselves as orthodox Sikhs, and many observers consider them to be generally ritually disciplined and pious (Dusenbery 2008, 15–6, 27, 42; Jakobsh 2008, 398). Sometimes referred to as ‘*gora*’ (caucasian or ‘white’) Sikhs – they differ from Punjabi Sikhs most significantly in their emphasis on Kundalini Yoga as a key spiritual practice, though they also are contrasted by the special names they are given, by their reverence towards Yogi Bhajan, by their vegetarianism, by the equality granted to women with respect to Sikh ceremonies and attire, and by their dress – they wear all-white clothing and women as well as men wear turbans (Dusenbery 2008, 27–8).⁴

It is important to note that many 3HO Kundalini Yoga teachers and the vast majority of students are not formal members of Sikh Dharma. According to one estimate, today there are approximately 10,000 Sikh Dharma members – almost all of whom practice 3HO Kundalini Yoga – and significantly more non-members who also regularly practice it.⁵ This paper will clarify key characteristics of 3HO Kundalini Yoga and explore the possible connections and significance of it to traditional Sikhism, in light of criticisms that have been raised by certain Punjabi Sikhs and western critics. Recent significant comparative studies of Punjabi Sikhs and Sikh Dharma members have tended to focus on social and cultural issues, with little reference to 3HO Kundalini Yoga, and little reflection on the possible relevance of this yoga to such comparative study.⁶ I will begin in Section 2 of this paper to outline the key features of the practice, theory, transformative processes, and ideals of 3HO Kundalini Yoga, and in Section 3 explore how these are related to Sikh theology and goals of spiritual transformation and liberation, reflecting especially on the question of the status of Sikh Dharma in relation to traditional Sikhism, in light of this emphasis on Kundalini Yoga.

2. Key characteristics of 3HO Kundalini Yoga

2.1 *Kriyas (yoga sets)*

3HO Kundalini Yoga includes a vast array of *kriyas*, which are defined generally as ‘an action or series of actions that completes a process and has a predictable outcome’. A *kriya* is ‘a sequence of postures, breath, and sound that are integrated together to allow the manifestation of a particular state’ (Bhajan 2007, 112, 100). Some single exercises are *kriyas* in themselves, but typically a number of exercises are linked together in a single yoga set. There are hundreds of specific *kriyas* that have been taught by Yogi Bhajan and collected by his students in various publications over the last four decades. They

include various breathing techniques, body postures and movements, hand positions, mental and devotional foci, and reverent chanting. Each clearly defined and structured meditative set is intended to aid in the transformation of a specific aspect of a person's physical, emotional, and/or spiritual makeup, including realigning and integrating the body and the mind, reducing and eliminating resistances to emotional-spiritual transformation, and becoming open to one's higher or Infinite Self or Soul in union with God and integrating this spiritual core with one's mind and body (Bhajan 2007, 101). 3HO Kundalini Yoga explicitly draws upon a wide variety of traditional Indian Yogas, with special reference to the Naad Yoga (mysticism of sound) that Yogi Bhajan associates with Sikhism.⁷

2.2 *Pranayama (breath meditations)*

Kundalini Yoga seeks to lower the frequency of the breath and to deepen the breath, claiming that this will lead to many positive physiological effects specific to the type of breath meditation one is practicing.⁸ There are many different *pranayamas* (breath meditations) and nine major types of meditative breathing, with numerous variations of these forms. Major breath techniques include: Breath of Fire (rapid, rhythmic, continuous breathing, where the air is expelled through the nostrils on the exhale while drawing in the abdomen); Cannon Breath (Breath of Fire through the mouth); Lion or Dog Breath (powerful breath with the tongue extended); Alternate Nostril Breath; Segmented Breaths (inhalation and exhalation are separated into various parts); Whistle Breath; Curled Tongue Breath (*Sitali Pranayam*); Teeth Breath (*Sitkari Pranayam*); and Sipping Breath (*Vatskar Pranayam*) (Bhajan 2007, 95–7).

An attention to breathing is an important feature in most Kundalini Yoga exercises, and a specific focus in certain meditations. A constant admonition in dealing with mental distractions is to shift one's attention to the breath, and intense concentration on one's deep breathing is remarkably helpful in completing the more challenging *asanas* (postures). According to Kundalini Yoga theory, each breath exercise has specific effects on the physiology and spirituality of an individual; and each breath exercise can be done in a very wide variety of body postures, thus altering the effects slightly or significantly.

2.3 *Asana (posture)*

Asana (posture) is also a feature of all meditations and exercises. We can include in this very general category sitting postures, relaxation postures, hand *mudras* (positions), and even various stances and movements of the legs, arms, and body as a whole. Specific postures open up particular pathways or flow-ways for *pranic* or subtle life energy along certain meridian points. According to Kundalini Yoga theory, the experience of this flow of subtle energy will affect how and what one feels and thinks. It is also crucial in stimulating *kundalini* (spiritual energy), which opens one to an awareness of one's higher Self or Soul in union with ultimate Reality, and in integrating it with one's egoic self and psychic personality (Bhajan 2007, 100, 101).

There are six basic sitting postures. The key to sitting postures is to maintain a straight spine, balanced posture, and neck lock, in order to nourish and maintain an effective flow of subtle energy, maintain stability, and to conserve strength (Bhajan 2007, 103–4). The basic sitting poses of Lotus (*Padmasana*), Perfect (*Siddhasana*), and Easy Pose (*Sukhasana*) involve sitting on a mat or sheepskin (for electromagnetic

insulation) in cross-legged stances with the feet in various positions under or on the thigh and/or calf, and the arms stretched forward straight over the knees. There are three variations of the most popular Easy Pose (*Sukhasana*), with the most commonly practiced form placing the feet under the opposite thigh and/or calf. Rock pose involves sitting straight up on one's legs with the heels under the sitting bones, and Hero or Warrior Pose involves sitting on the left leg only, with the right knee up near the chest and hands in prayer pose.⁹ Along with Sitting on a Chair, these are the basic sitting poses, but there are numerous variations of these basic poses and many other sitting postures, depending on the intention of the *kriya*. These poses are combined with various breath and chanting meditations and almost always include a particular *mudra*.

There are nine basic *mudras* – special arrangements of the fingers and hands. Yogi Bhajan says that the form of the hand ‘contains, collects and directs energy’ to certain parts of the body and the brain (Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa 1979, 146). Specific hand *mudras* affect our consciousness in a certain way and stimulate various emotions and virtues. Gyan Mudra (passive) – where the thumb touches the tip of the index finger with the last three fingers stretched out together – is the most common *mudra* and stimulates calmness and openness. The thumb over the index finger indicates Gyan Mudra (active), and is associated with power. The thumb touching the other specific fingers stimulates different attitudes or energies: middle finger – patience, ring finger – revitalization, and little finger – intuition and communication. Other standard *mudras* include Buddha Mudra, where a palm rests face up on the other palm in the lap (for receptivity); Bear Grip, where inter-locked fingers in front of the chest form a pulling fist (for heart stimulation); Prayer Pose, where the palms of the hands are pressed together with fingers up against the chest (for devotional centering); and Venus Lock, where the fingers are interlaced with palms touching (sexual energy channeling and balancing). There are specific astrological associations and significances for all *mudras* (Bhajan 2007, 103–6).

Five standard relaxation postures help in the process of physiological rejuvenation – they work to settle and redistribute subtle energy, center emotions, and release distortions and integrate new patterns of thinking and feeling. Easy Pose, described above as a sitting posture, can also act as a relaxation posture; Baby or Child pose is Rock Pose with one's forehead touching the ground forward and arms stretched out either behind along the side of the body or reaching forward (*Guru Pranam*); Knees Pulled Up is a back-stretched posture where one wraps one's arms around the knees as they are propped up to the chest; and Corpse Pose (*Shavaasana*) involves stretching completely out on one's back, arms down the side, palms up, and feet uncrossed (Bhajan 2007, 117). It is interesting how relaxation is treated as an important *exercise* in 3HO Kundalini Yoga – it is regarded as a practice that involves a passive surrender that is very difficult for the majority of people. Most *kriyas* include a number of short relaxation practices between various exercises, as well as a longer rest period towards the end of the set.

Of course, there are also various Standing, Kneeling, Laying, and Crouching Postures, and many body movement or rhythmic exercises are important *asanas*, though these are not highlighted in the instructor textbook in the fashion of those standard *asanas* that I previously described. Kundalini Yoga seems to go well beyond the standard body postures and movement exercises one finds in other contemporary yogas, though without the athletic or fitness foci on bodily enhancement or radical postural austerities that are often associated with those practices. In that regard, Mark Singleton argues that

contemporary transnational Hatha Yoga departs from traditional models of yoga. He claims there is now a

primacy accorded to *āsana* as a system of health, fitness, and well-being, and the relegation or elimination of other key aspects such as *śaṭkarmas*, *mudrā*, and even (though to a slightly lesser extent) *prāṇāyāma*. While some schools of modern yoga catering to an international audience do conserve some of these elements, in the main they have become distinctly subordinate to the practice of *āsana*, which is itself rationalized in ways markedly alien to the kind of *haṭha* yoga outlined in [traditional yoga scriptures].

(Singleton 2010, 29–31)

Although Singleton might be overstating his case here, 3HO Kundalini Yoga provides an illuminative contrast to the trend in modern yoga that Singleton is highlighting. As I said, body *asanas* in 3HO Kundalini Yoga are almost always accompanied by a specific *mudra* and breath focus. Other differences that I notice between 3HO Kundalini Yoga and other major contemporary forms of Yoga are the practice of keeping one's eyes closed for most exercises, and the special emphasis on certain features: on the breath, nose-breathing, and the practice of Breath of Fire; on the silent repetition of the *mantra* 'Sat Nam' ('Truth is my name' or 'I am in essence one with Truth') in conjunction with breath inhalation and exhalation, respectively; on the relaxation and integration of meditative energies and experiences; and on *bhakti* and spirituality in general, including devotional or reverent chanting.

2.4 Naad Yoga (mysticism of sound)

What marks 3HO Kundalini Yoga off most significantly from most other contemporary Yoga schools is perhaps its stress on *mantra* meditation (Naad, Jappa, or Laya Yoga), in conjunction with other yoga practices (Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa 1979, 146). Yogi Bhajan speaks of a science of Naad – the Yoga of sound vibrations – where '[p]roper rhythmic enunciation and repetition of sounds can unlock subconscious emotions, establish certain physiological states, enhance intuition and tap inner potentials of the brain and mind' (Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa 1979, 147).¹⁰ More significantly, sacred sound patterns have existed since the beginning of creation and are associated with divine creativity and spiritual realities: 'They are the tides and rhythms of the movement of the creative pulse of Infinite consciousness. They vibrate in all things continuously' (Bhajan 2007, 71). Through appropriate sounding with devotional intention, one identifies with spiritual reality, which has powerful healing and other transforming effects on the person. Basically, the rhythm and sound of a sacred chant are thought to stimulate a link of one's consciousness with underlying infinite Consciousness and Truth. Reverence and self-surrender are key attitudes to the transformative dynamic, and can be stimulated through the chanting. Yogi Bhajan speaks of 'a merge between the personal experience of you and the impersonal experience of Infinity beyond you and within you', and of the transformative effects of this union with *Akal Purakh* (the timeless One) on the person, which is the goal of Kundalini Yoga (Bhajan 2007, 72).¹¹

Naturally, Yogi Bhajan draws heavily on the Sikh *Paurees* (steps) of *japji* (prayers) in highlighting the significance of *mantra* meditation in Kundalini Yoga. He speaks of *Shabd*

Guru, the sacred ‘special sound that is a teacher’ (Bhajan 2007, 70) – sound currents that act to remove one’s distortions and help one to become open to and merge with spiritual energies and realities. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* is the actual *Shabd Guru* encoded, and the Sikh Gurus were special mediums, through their poetic compositions, of the *Shabd Guru*, even if sacred *mantras* are found in other sources as well.¹² Indeed, ultimate Reality in 3HO Kundalini Yoga is conceived as *Sat Guru* and the essential 3HO Kundalini Yoga *mantra* is the *Mul Mantra*,¹³ which is the first *japji* and opens Sikh sacred scripture. Most of the frequently used *mantras* in 3HO Kundalini Yoga are drawn or adapted from Sikh scripture, though there is openness to *mantras* drawn from other traditions.

Each Kundalini Yoga class begins with the *Adi Mantra* chanted three times from Prayer Pose in a sitting posture: ‘*Ong Namo Guru Dev Namo*’ (‘I bow to the subtle divine Wisdom, the divine Teacher within’). Drawing clearly from Sikh spirituality, this opening intention is to help to draw a person into a communal sacred space, to connect with the divine *Guru*, and to merge one’s consciousness with that of past and current teachers of infinite Truth. Like all sacred *mantras*, Yogi Bhajan sees it as a significant vehicle of grace. This is often followed by a breath meditation and warm ups in preparation for a particular *kriya* – a series of *asanas*, *mudras*, and breathing, sounding, and relaxation meditations – which focuses on a specific personal resistance or transformative goal. The last, normally longer, relaxation meditation of a *kriya* is sometimes followed by a breath or sounding meditation, and the class is ended with a vocalized prayer – usually the ‘Long-Time Sunshine Song’ – and one or more long *Sat Nam*. Many classes are 90 minutes in length, though some are shorter; and students are encouraged to participate in regular early morning *Sadhana* (self-discipline) before dawn, given the auspicious meditative conditions at that time of the day, which includes Sikh *japji*, other reverent chanting, and a 3HO Kundalini Yoga *kriya*.

Yogi Bhajan also began in the 1970s to promote what he called ‘White Tantric Yoga’, personally overseeing day-long workshops which are now led by special facilitators. Although distinguished from 3HO Kundalini Yoga in the meditative focus towards a partner, White Tantric Yoga incorporates aspects of Kundalini Yoga into its practices. The large number of participants, extended length of the *kriyas*, and ‘the polarities of the male–female interaction’ are said to significantly increase and condense energy, and thereby provide a more powerful context and stimulus for emotional–spiritual transformation than in regular Kundalini Yoga classes (Bhajan 2007, 140).¹⁴

3. Reflections on Kundalini Yoga in relation to Sikhism

The transformative ideal of 3HO Kundalini Yoga is explicitly Sikh *mukti* – union between the Soul and God that liberates the Soul from the cycle of rebirth. Kundalini Yoga is thought to support and enhance a person’s movement or transformation to *mukti*, which can occur while one is still alive (*jiwan mukt*) (Bhajan 2007, 239). Yogi Bhajan’s theoretical accounts of the various related dynamics can be a bit convoluted, but they can be simplified and clarified in a straightforward way. Certain sets of postures, body and body-part movements, *mudras*, breathing meditations, and chants are thought to remove specific physical, emotional, and spiritual blocks and distortions, and to open up particular pathways or flow ways for subtle life energy and its release – *prana* and

apana – along various meridian points of the subtle body. Specific body locks (*bandhas*) applied during or at the end of an exercise also enhance the blending of *prana* and *apana* and help to stimulate its flow.¹⁵

The experience of this flow of energy will affect how and what a person feels and thinks. It is also crucial in stimulating the soul consciousness or divine energy of the person. *Kundalini* is a subtle emanation of the soul, united with *Sat Guru*, which underlies and supports a person's life, but typically remains unconscious, repressed, and constricted. The intention is to support the awakening, stimulation, and circulation of *kundalini* throughout the body and mind via the expansion and integration of *prana* and *apana*, allowing it to pierce or charge the different energy centers or *chakras* of the person, and assimilate these with the physical body and mind. As noted, this requires removing the conscious and subconscious blocks and distortions of the body and mind that inhibit the flow of this spiritual consciousness and resist its integration. The goal is the transformation and integration of the body in and through this underlying spiritual consciousness, in union with *Sat Guru*.¹⁶ Although the theoretical account of this yoga is not always clear and precise, Yogi Bhajan clearly and carefully explains in a systematic fashion very many practical exercises that he claims stimulate and support this positive movement.

I need to stress how impressive these practical teachings are in terms of their number, scope, complexity, and apparent consistency, as well as the generally well-informed and professional manner in which they are presented and taught by 3HO Kundalini Yoga teachers. I suspect that many of the critics of Yogi Bhajan and 3HO/Sikh Dharma do not appreciate the apparent significance of this body of teachings, which have been positively received by many people over the last 40 years. Yogi Bhajan and 3HO/Sikh Dharma members also explore in their writings the way in which these various exercises correspond with human physiology, describing in some detail the positive effects that particular yoga exercises have for each of the 10 systems of anatomy and the specific organs, emotions, attitudes, and processes of the person (Bhajan 2007, 157–72).

How successful these exercises are in bringing about the specified effects in each case is open to question, but in theory these claims can be tested and verified. Moreover, 3HO Kundalini Yoga clearly has powerful mind-altering and even life-changing effects on many people who undertake its practice. People claim to experience improved emotional and physical health, balance, and integration; enhanced sensual feeling; increased mental clarity and intuitive insight; feelings of serenity and emotional/spiritual strength and assurance; and ecstatic states of consciousness. These are key points to keep in mind in reflecting on the concerns that have been raised against Yogi Bhajan and 3HO Kundalini Yoga by some critics.

Firstly, Yogi Bhajan is not a stereotypical modern Indian guru in style and demeanor. Although he became a towering authoritative figure in 3HO/Sikh Dharma, he refused to initiate students and never took personal credit for his teachings, which he insisted he received from others. Much of his written teaching comes originally via lecture, and his narrative style is not as charismatic as many popular modern day spiritual figures, even if he did exude much personal charm and was an excellent yoga teacher, as his students attest. He was an intense, direct, and challenging teacher, in counseling students on very personal life matters. There is a homespun quality and sometimes meandering disjointedness, stiltedness, and imprecision about his lectures and writing. Doris Jakobsh observes they 'were often fragmentary and enigmatic' (Jakobsh 2008, 392), and he had a kind of abruptness and in-your-face frankness. However, he was obviously not trained

as a systematic philosopher or theologian, and I suspect that some of his theoretical reflections especially have benefited by the editing and expansion of his students, and could be even more carefully developed and refined. In fact, his presentation style reminds me of St Ignatius of Loyola – the sixteenth-century Roman Catholic founder of the Society of Jesus – who was also rough and awkward stylistically, though Yogi Bhajan exudes more humor and charm than one finds in Ignatius' writings.

Secondly, the roots of Yogi Bhajan's version of Kundalini Yoga are unclear and underdeveloped. Yogi Bhajan is purported to have become a Master of Hatha Yoga under Acharya Narinder Dev of Yoga Smriti, and studied extensively Vedanta philosophy at Sivananada Ashram in Rishikesh (Bhajan 2007, 59, 61). He also claims to have studied Kundalini Yoga under the tutelage of Sant Hazara Singh, who is said to have acknowledged Yogi Bhajan's mastery at the age of 16. However, in a highly vitriolic, extensive critique written in 1977, Trilochan Singh questions Yogi Bhajan's purported connection with Sant Hazara Singh and seeks to dissociate Sikhism completely from Kundalini Yoga (T. Singh 1977, 119–20).

Yogi Bhajan speaks of a rediscovery of ancient Kundalini Yoga practices by Guru Nanak, Baba Siri Chand, and Guru Gobind Singh, claiming a 3000-year-old transmission lineage through Guru Ram Das and the House of the Sikhs (Bhajan 2007, 34; Singh and Fowles 1980, 9).¹⁷ The problem is that there seems to be no information available concerning the background of Sant Hazara Singh, which would support the traditional connecting line of 3HO Kundalini Yoga with Sikhism that Yogi Bhajan claims, however minor this might be. There has been a brief attempt by some of his students in 1977 to draw on Sikh scripture to support the linking of the Sikh gurus with aspects of 3HO Kundalini Yoga, but the references in this publication are far too few and the contextual interpretation too controversial to provide real support.¹⁸

There is some speculation among some contemporary devotees that links Yogi Bhajan with Swami Dhivendra Acharya and also with Baba Virsa Singh in a lineage connection to Baba Siri Chand – a son of Guru Nanak – and the Udasis, and there is reference in the 3HO teaching manual to the dependence of an Indra Nittri chanting meditation upon the teaching of Guru Nanak and Baba Siri Chand.¹⁹ Although there seems to be no textual–historical evidence to support such claims, surely one must postulate some teaching lineage within the Sikh tradition to account for Yogi Bhajan's extensive knowledge and expertise of Kundalini Yoga. Given the depth, scope, complexity, and consistency of his teachings, it seems likely to me that Yogi Bhajan was trained in Kundalini Yoga by a well-qualified teacher; and unless a critic can show that this teacher was a Hindu, Yogi Bhajan's claims of connection to Sant Hazara Singh, who himself also would have had a teacher, do in fact suggest that some form of Kundalini Yoga was practiced historically by some Sikhs, albeit perhaps secretly and in very small numbers.

Also, the historical dependences of Sikhism on the *sant*-singer *bhakti* tradition of northern India, and the dependence of this tradition on the Tantra Yoga Nath tradition, support in a very general way the claims of a possible Kundalini Yoga lineage running historically through Sikhism, however minor this might be (Elsberg 2003, 28–9; McLeod 1997, 91, 93). Perhaps Yogi Bhajan should be taken at his word when he insists:

The Teachings are the Teachings, and have no one's personality in them. I never edit them; you should not edit them. It is a Golden Chain. My own prayer is that you can

perfect what it is, and go with it. It is a funny thing. It is a three-thousand-year-old proven path — it's not going to stop.

(Bhajan 2007, 99)

So what is the relationship of 3HO Kundalini Yoga to traditional Sikhism? Aside from his skepticism about Yogi Bhajan's alleged Sikh-Kundalini Yoga lineage, Trilochan Singh accuses Yogi Bhajan of propping himself up as a saintly figure, of treating Sikhism 'only as an offshoot of [his] Tantric Cult', and of 'sacrilegiously [identifying the processes of Tantric Yoga] with the techniques of Sikh mysticism'. Singh claims:

Yogi Bhajan is using sacred Sikh mantras and the sacred name of Guru Ram Das as a mantle for his Tantric Sex Yoga which would inevitably lead to mental and physical debauchery of those who take his brand of Sikhism contaminated by crazy sex-energizing *asanas* seriously.

(T. Singh 1977, 9, 29, 74)

Obviously, there was something about Yogi Bhajan that stimulated a great deal of passionate animosity on the part of many of his detractors. Yet, in response to Trilochan Singh, we need first to note Yogi Bhajan's stress on Naad Yoga as the essential transformative practice, one that is oriented towards a radical surrender and union with *Sat Guru*. This would seem to be echoing the teaching of Guru Nanak and other Sikh Gurus. 3HO Kundalini Yoga is a specific version of Kundalini Yoga, one that would appear to be grounded heavily in Sikh spirituality, especially in granting special status to meditation on the sacred Word and in its ideal of Sikh *mukti*. This connection is further highlighted in the teaching of a regular pre-dawn sadhana — a prescription given by Guru Nanak — as well as the stress on the throat energy center — which Yogi Bhajan says locks 'your words in time and the Heavens' — in contrast to other accounts of traditional Kundalini Yoga, which locate the center of the *mukti* event in the higher *chakras* (Bhajan 2007, 195).

3HO Kundalini Yoga places Sikh mysticism at the heart of its practice and experience, which certainly links it intimately with Sikhism. Still, there is an insistence on the special significance of other practices of Kundalini Yoga to Sikh Dharma — that various yoga practices are of great benefit in a person's spiritual journey to final union in *Sat Guru*, in removing egoic blocks and distortions, healing physical and emotional wounds, and cultivating positive thoughts, feelings, and attitudes. 3HO Kundalini Yoga draws upon theories, practices, and mantras from other Indian Yoga traditions that support the movement to the spiritual ideal. For example, it conceives of *Adi Shakti* 'as another name of God' (T. Singh 1977, 49), and also acknowledges the redemptive and liberating power of certain extraordinary spiritual figures from other traditions — including Christ and Buddha — and draws on their support in the transformative movement. There is an explicit and constructive openness to inter-religious dialogue and inter-spiritual experience in Sikh Dharma, which perhaps is to overstep the approach to relations with other traditions that we find in other groups of the Sikh Panth.

There is also an insistence in 3HO/Sikh Dharma that Yoga is not restricted to a secret elite, segregated by gender, and set in isolation from social concerns and responsibilities. Moreover, as we have seen, the central goal of Yogi Bhajan's Yoga is not, as Trilochan Singh claims, 'vitalizing sexual energy, and channeling that sexual energy to

stages of exaltation' (T. Singh 1977, 66). In fact, Tantric partner *asanas* and meditations are a minor feature of Kundalini Yoga, and teachers are instructed that these practices are meant only for advanced students, 'never to be done to sensually or sexually seduce one's partner', and to be approached with 'neutrality and purity' (Bhajan 2007, 140). Moreover, Yogi Bhajan emphasized rather conservatively the social and spiritual significance of permanent monogamous relationships in supporting children, cultivating the virtues of self-surrender and service, and participating in a sacred spiritual union (Elsberg 2003, 188, 124, 126). Still, he was no sexual prude and acknowledged that certain kinds of yoga practices would enhance immensely one's sexual experience. He treats sexuality in a very positive light, claiming that 3HO Kundalini Yoga is especially appropriate for householders who are sexually active. Although the ultimate spiritual ideal is not sexual ecstasy, even that embodied experience is drawn into the goal of self-surrender to underlying spiritual Reality, and of drawing that union into the context of a physical-emotional transformation (Bhajan 2007, 190).

The issue of sexuality, however, relates to criticisms raised against Yogi Bhajan concerning his authoritarian bearing towards his students. He was accused of excessively controlling and manipulating Sikh Dharma group members, and two lawsuits filed in 1986 included accusations of sexual improprieties, assault, and causing emotional distress. Although some of the complaints were dismissed in pre-trial hearings and the suits were eventually settled out of court, the controversy accentuated concerns about Yogi Bhajan's teaching and leadership styles, motives, and integrity.²⁰ His supporters deny the allegations, pointing out that they were never substantiated. His detractors claim the assertions simply highlight the distortions of 3HO/Sikh Dharma.²¹

These controversies that have arisen for the group seem to me to be natural negative side effects typical of these kinds of religious organizations, and relatively minor compared with some of the controversies of other larger and more powerful religious institutions. No doubt Yogi Bhajan had his flaws and weaknesses, and perhaps it might be best for the organization if members of 3HO/Sikh Dharma acknowledge these limitations in their biographical-hagiographical accounts. Yet in his defense, it should be noted that students flocked to Yogi Bhajan for his support and direction, and he was not afraid to challenge what he perceived to be a student's obstacles to emotional/spiritual development. So, one can see the potential for painful mistakes, disappointments, and major conflicts.²² Moreover, Yogi Bhajan no doubt acquired envious and resentful opponents and enemies as his popularity quickly grew. He was very politically astute, a capable businessman, and cultivated connections with many powerful and influential people. Yogi Bhajan also had an immense practical knowledge and skill in Kundalini Yoga, and obviously was an excellent yoga teacher. His body of teachings is very impressive, as people who seriously practice them will attest. Moreover, his devotion to Sikhism seemed to be genuine and his contributions to the faith quite significant.

These last points are very telling in responding to the question of the status of Sikh Dharma in relation to traditional Sikhism, in light of its emphasis on Kundalini Yoga. In closing, I note that I am inclined to think that Sikh Dharma should be regarded as legitimately 'Sikhi', given its commitment to Sikh rituals, celebrations, theology, and spirituality – in conformity with major guidelines set forth in the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* – the major Sikh code of discipline established in 1950. Pashaura Singh notes that 'Punjabi Sikhs in general praise the strict Khalsa-style discipline of the White Sikhs',²³ even though, as Verne Dusenberry observes, 'most Punjabi Sikhs continue to treat Gora

Sikhs as Sikhs of a different *zat* [caste]' (Dusenbery 2008, 43). Pashaura Singh situates Sikh Dharma as one of a number of popular-level Sikh groups in a 'colorful diversity within the Sikh Panth', along with the Nihangs, the Ahand Kirtani Jatha, the Damdami Taksal, the Namdhari, Nirankaris, and others, all of which diverge creatively to some degree or other from the codified terms of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada*. He observes:

Sikhism has had and continues to have a seemingly unending number of dominant, institutional, regional, national, and local expressions of faith in constant dynamic relationship with one another, continually influencing each other and defining and redefining what it has meant and continues to mean to be a Sikh in different places around the globe.

(P. Singh 2013, 46–7)

Perhaps 3HO/Sikh Dharma should be regarded as an alternative form of Sikhism, insofar as it champions the practice of what we might call 'Sikh Yoga', in contrast both to other contemporary forms of Yoga (including other forms of Kundalini Yoga) and other groups from the Sikh Panth. It is obviously creatively 'redefining what it has meant and continues to mean to be a Sikh' in light of the passion for Kundalini Yoga by both its members and non-Sikh students. Moreover, in establishing Sikh Dharma and popularizing 3HO Kundalini Yoga in the West, Yogi Bhajan has perhaps done more to support Sikhi outreach than any other individual Sikh in modern times. Although in my experience Sikh Dharma members never actively proselytize their Sikhism, every student who attends a 3HO Kundalini Yoga class participates in some form of Sikh meditation, ritual, and spirituality, in some cases without realizing it. It seems to me that 3HO/Sikh Dharma is a wonderful example of inter-religious dialogue – especially the dialogues of religious experience and theology or life philosophy – insofar as most new students come to it with another faith perspective, be it a religious or secular point of view. They need to learn to integrate creatively aspects of their native faith-experience with this Sikh Yoga, as they continue to benefit and develop from its practice.

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Notes

- 1 The textual and internet research that I have done for this study is colored somewhat by my own experiences since 2007 of the regular practice of 3HO Kundalini Yoga, and by discussions I have had with various Toronto area 3HO Kundalini Yoga teachers.

- Sources for the information in this section on Yogi Bhajan's early years in North America and early developments of 3HO and Sikh Dharma include: accounts given by S.P. Kaur Khalsa on the Kundalini Yoga (2012) and Light Travel websites (2007) at <http://www.kundaliniyoga.org/shakti.html> and <http://www.lighttravel.org/mem/Ltr07.htm> (accessed December 6, 2012); S.S. Kaur Khalsa (1989, 3–4); the Sikh Dharma International website [2012] at <http://www.sikhdharma.org/content/siri-singh-sahib-bhaisahib-harbhajan-singh-khalsa-yogiji> (accessed December 6, 2012); the 3HO Foundation website (n.d.) at <http://www.3ho.org/about/> (accessed December 6, 2012); Sardarni Premka Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa (1979, 10–46); and by Dusenbery (forthcoming, chapter 36). They also include a 1979 letter from Shakti Parwha Kaur Khalsa to James George, who was the High Commissioner of India from 1967 to 1972; and discussions I have had with James George. George's late wife and daughter took private yoga classes with Yogi Bhajan twice a month for over a year in New Delhi; and later George approved Yogi Bhajan's visa to Canada and provided a letter of recommendation that Yogi Bhajan's used to support his early search for work in North America.
- 2 Statistics are drawn from the International Kundalini Teachers Association homepage on the 3HO Foundation website [n.d.] at <http://www.3ho.org/search/findteacher.php?countryRegion=North+America&countryCode> (accessed December 6, 2012). Individual totals are: USA=1123; Canada 178; Mexico 81. Not all certified teachers are registered at this website, so the actual numbers are higher.
 - 3 Doris Jakobsh writes,

But perhaps sternest censure is invoked by the veneration and reverence of Yogi Bhajan, known to his followers as Siri Singh Sahib (literally the 'Exalted Lord Singh'), a title reserved by Punjabi Sikhs for the traditional Sikh Gurus, the Guru Granth Sahib and other seats of Sikh spiritual authority [the High Priest of the Golden Temple and the Jathedars of Four Takhts].

(Jakobsh 2008, 397)

- 4 Pashaura Singh notes that, among groups of the Sikh Panth, 'the Namdharis dress entirely in white' and the Akhand Kirtani Jatha 'encourages complete equality of women in every aspect of Sikh life', including wearing turbans. Thus, these specific practices of Sikh Dharma are not exclusive to it (P. Singh 2013, 35, 43).
- 5 Statistics are drawn from *Religious Movements Homepage: Sikh Dharma* on the World Religions and Spirituality Project website [2011] at <http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/HappyHealthyHoly.htm> (accessed on December 6, 2012). It is hard to know how many people today regularly practice 3HO Kundalini Yoga. I would be interested to know this number, as well as the female/male ratio, and its comparison with participation in other Yoga schools in the West.
- 6 See, for example, Verne A Dusenbery, 'Punjabi Sikhs and Gora Sikhs: Conflicting Assertions of Sikh Identity in North America' (with added 'Postscript') (Dusenbery 2008, 1–45) and Jakobsh (2008, 385–408). Elsberg (2003) provides brief and broad historical outlines of Sikhism, Yoga, and Tantra, and gives a general sense of the practice and significance of 3HO Kundalini Yoga, especially for women of Sikh Dharma, in a chapter, 'Roots and sources: Sikhism and tantra' (25–53). But she does not develop the specific details of 3HO Kundalini Yoga theory and practice nor bring it into extensive dialogue with Sikh spirituality.

- 7 Yogi Bhajan claims 'Jappa Yoga is part of Kundalini Yoga as are Shakti Yoga, Laya Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga, and Hatha Yoga'. The meanings of these various types of Yoga for Yogi Bhajan are very loose and imprecise, and only very briefly developed. Jappa is related to *mantra* recitation, Laya Yoga has to do with the merging rhythmic effects of such recitation, Bhakti focuses on devotional love, Shakti refers to devotional practices that are empowering, Raja is meditative focused yoga, and Hatha refers to yoga that stresses postures and breathing in the harmonization of polarities (Bhajan 2007, 36, 34–5). All of these aspects of Yoga are incorporated into 3HO Kundalini Yoga in a relatively systematic fashion; and some attention is given to the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali in the teaching manual (Bhajan 2007, 42–7).
- 8 The teaching manual, *The Aquarian Teacher*, claims that deepening and lowering the frequency of the breath and suspending the breath have many positive physiological effects: it leads to better cooperation between brain hemispheres; it cleanses the blood, reduces toxins in the lungs, balances the pH level of the body; it reconditions the nervous system and leads to a proportional calming of tension, stress, anxiety, worry, and fear; it stimulates a greater openness to underlying spirit and the development of intuition; it triggers endorphins, enhances alertness, and increases vitality and pranic flow; and it aids emotional and physical healing, and the breaking of patterns of emotional-psychic distortion and addiction (Bhajan 2007, 90–3).
- 9 It is interesting that this Hero or Warrior Pose sitting posture corresponds to that for the *amrit* ceremony that is adapted by the Damdami Taskal. The *amrit* ceremony accepted by the *Siklh Rahit Maryada* has the leg positions reversed (P. Singh 2013, 39).
- 10 The actions of the tongue in the mouth and the sounds are thought to affect the brain's hypothalamus so that it 'releases waves of neuro-chemical messages [*rasaa*] to activate the pituitary gland which commands all the other glands which regulate the level of our immune function, the quality of our emotions and the flexibility and effectiveness of our actions'. Also Yogi Bhajan writes:

By rotating the tongue across these points using the primal sounds, different parts of the brain are systematically called into action. These specific sound sequences are healing. They create wholeness, repair the body image, adjust the flow of thoughts and never create any harm.

(Bhajan 2007, 73, 74)

- 11 For example, referring to the Doeī Shabd Kriya, commentators write:

This Kundalini Kriya can take you beyond the finite self and connect your conscious and subconscious with your superconscious divine self. It is from the discipline of Laya Yoga which uses the sound current and the awakening of the chakras to transform your awareness. The two sounds *Sat Naam* and *Wahe Guru* are the seed mantras that open the chakras....

Or, more provocatively, Yogi Bhajan writes:

In a sense, mantras pre-exist as the DNA of God. They are in each cell of the creation. Their sound has focus, and contains a provocative seed which provides a template for higher experience. Repeating a mantra restructures the patterns

in the mind that filters experience. ...You become the mantra and the entire universe meditates on you.

(Bhajan 2007, 111, 133)

12 Yogi Bhajan comments:

Those [Sikh] mantras just happen to be correct mantras. It's not because they come from the Sikh tradition.It doesn't have to only be in Gurmukhi (the vibratory language of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib). I draw correct mantras from wherever I can. There are tons of mantras – I only use those which I know will be very elementary and will work.

(Bhajan 2007, 69)

13 Yogi Bhajan and editors comment: 'The Mul Mantra is very much the essence of the qualities, the nature, the character, and the depth of Kundalini Yoga' (Bhajan 2007, 25).

14 These day-long workshops are offered regularly worldwide; they are also offered as 3-day retreat courses in Florida and New Mexico during the Winter and Summer solstice, and annually at the European Yoga Festival in August in France.

15 The Body Locks are: the Neck Lock (*Jalandhar Bandh*), which is the straightening and centering of the neck in most breathing and all chanting exercises – the Diaphragm Lock (*Uddiyana Bandh*), the gentle pressing forward and upward of the thoracic and lumbar spine on an exhale – and the Root Lock (*Mulbandh*), the contraction of the anal sphincter, the sex organ, and the lower abdominal muscles and navel point (Bhajan 2007, 107–10).

16 Yogi Bhajan and editors comment:

When *prana* and *apana* are both strong, the opposite energies mix together, uniting through the navel by applying *mulbandh*. This opens the doorway to the flow of Kundalini, which is the opening of the soul energy of awareness. The kundalini will not awaken and rise until these two energies – *prana* (positive) and *apana* (negative) – are integrated and balanced in the Root Chakra. This pressure is required to raise the kundalini and it causes its ascendance through *sushmuna*, also called the silver cord.

The efforts at posture, breathing practices, and meditation all catalyze this central process of transformation. After a series of exercises or during practices it is desirable to contain the blend of the *prana* and *apana*, so that the kundalini energy can establish itself, deepen its effect, and initiate the opening of the channels it flows into. This blend is achieved through the use of the body locks, the *bandhas*.

(Bhajan 2007, 107, 175, 176)

17 Also, commentators write: 'Guru Nanak chanted *sat kartaar* in Naad Yoga to master time and space and to recognize the creativity of the Infinite. Guru Gobind Singhji taught his warriors to chant the *Guru Gaitree Mantra* in postures which gave them courage' (Kaur Khalsa and Sat Kirpal Kaur Khalsa 1979, 142).

18 Trilochan Singh has accused Bhai Dayal Singh Khalsa, Sardar Vikram Singh Khalsa, and Sardarni Premka Kaur Khalsa of misquoting the translation by Manmohan Singh of

some of the 10 references from the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib* in support of their claims that Sikh Gurus experienced the highest yogic experiences and made positive reference to certain aspects of Kundalini Yoga (e.g. 'their Kundalini radiates... Meditate on the feet of the Satguru at the brow chakra... The Satguru will open the heart chakra, center of divine compassion...') (M. Singh 1983, 4634, 4293; T. Singh 1977, 24). However, it is important to note that these authors are not misquoting Manmohan Singh's translation but providing their own translations in certain cases. For example, a gurmukhi scholar has informed me that a reference to 'kundalini' in one sentence (that Manmohan Singh has translated as 'mind's tongue' (4634)) in fact is the literal translation of this word. So it seems quite plausible to me to translate this sentence as 'Associating with the saints their Kundalini radiates and through the Supreme Guru they enjoy the Supreme Bliss' (Singh Khalsa, Singh Khalsa, and Kaur Khalsa 1977, 29). However, as Trilochan Singh points out, the fact that we find this and a few other references to Yoga theory and practice in the *Guru Granth Sahib* does not show 'that the Sikh Gurus either subscribed to these systems or adopted them in any subtle or crude form in Sikhism' (T. Singh 1977, 26).

- 19 The Kundalini Research Institute instructor yoga manual states:

This meditation was taught by Guru Nanak to his second son, Baba Siri Chand. His son became a great *baal* yogi. That is a yogi who does not age, who still looks like a young boy, even in his old age. It is said Baba Siri Chand lived over 160 years. He was acknowledged by all the schools of Siddhi Yoga to be a great yogi. Under his guidance all the heads of the schools of yoga came and bowed to Guru Ram Das to seal for the future the lineage of the royal throne of Raj Yoga to his guidance and to his radiant Body. The yogis who practiced with him were called *udasis*.

(Bhajan 2010, 98)

Also, information from the Kundalini Research Institute claims that the sources of 3HO Kundalini Yoga

include many other yoga Masters of the Northern Punjab region of India as well as the unique contributions of the Gurus in the use of naad and Shabd Guru. Guru Nanak started the Udasi line through his son Baba Siri Chand, a Master who served and taught for more than 100 years. He taught to all existing lineages of that time and educated several of the Sikh Gurus in their youth.

(<http://www.kundaliniresearchinstitute.org/What%20is%20KY.htm>)

- 20 These criticisms raised against Yogi Bhajan concerning his authoritative bearing towards his students include arranging marriages, telling members where to live, naming children, and insisting that children leave their family to attend the Camp Miri Pirir, Sikh Dharma youth academy in India. More formally, two female ex-members filed a lawsuit in 1986 that 'accused Yogi Bhajan and other officers of Sikh Dharma of assault and battery, false arrest and imprisonment, fraud and deceit, infliction of emotional distress, racketeering, violation of the federal fair labor standards act, and involuntary servitude' (Elsberg 2003, 127; Jakobsh 2008, 396). Within the context of this suit, Yogi Bhajan was accused of having sexual

- relations with some of his secretaries and of not providing sufficient support for their financial independence from him and the organization. Apparently, there was another sexual abuse case in 1986, which was also settled out of court, filed by a sister of one of the secretaries, Guru Amrit Khalsa. People responding in defense of Yogi Bhajan claim that these accusations were never verified or substantiated, and the 'organization's religious leaders vehemently deny those allegations' (McDonald 2010, A1).
- 21 For example, Steven Hassan, a past leader of the Moon cult and now a cult-counselor, claims that 3HO/ Sikh Dharma 'was always about power and money'. '(Yogi) Bhajan is the consummate...cult leader' (McDonald 2010, A1). Another significant issue that has surfaced since Yogi Bhajan's death involves legal battles over control of businesses that were founded by 3HO/ Sikh Dharma. Before his death, Yogi Bhajan restructured his business holdings, which split the business and religious sides of the 3HO/ Sikh Dharma community. On the business end, he created Unto Infinity LLC, the 3HO community's business board, which controls Akal Security and Golden Temple, and some Unto Infinity board members then created the administrative non-profit Sikh Dharma Stewardship. The business arm funds the religious branches. On the religious side, he created Sikh Dharma International, the religious non-profit organization of 3HO/ Sikh Dharma, which has doctrinal authority over the group. Other non-profits that receive charitable funding from Unto Infinity are 3HO Foundation and Kundalini Research Institute. The lawsuit is between leaders of Unto Infinity and a group of 14 longtime students of Yogi Bhajan, led by Gurujot Singh, who are called the Khalsa Commonwealth (Pein 2010, 1–4; and information circulated via email by Guru Fatha Singh of Toronto, February 26, 2010).
- 22 For example, in excerpts from lectures, Yogi Bhajan says:

I never like a student. I never hate a student. Either I love or I try to love. That's all. Those I love, I am very, very critical, bitter, direct, grouchy. I mostly publicly joke with them about what I don't like about them. It's called 'chiseling method'. Insult them socially. Hurt them publicly. Surprise them unmathematically. I mean, keep going. Don't let them rest a minute. Because they should lose the sense of time and space. They are the *most* favorite. Less favorite...once in a while I call on them, talk to them. Say good things about them. And worst? Ignore them. These are the three ways of life. And without that, nobody can progress. And all three things need one thing: absolute commitment. Absolute. That's the job of a teacher: to wake up a man from a deep ego. 'Ego coma' they call it. Ego coma is the worst enemy of a mental mind...

(Bhajan 1985, 27)

- 23 Drawing upon the overview given by Pashaura Singh, these major aspects of the *Sikh Rahit Maryada* might be generally summarised as follows: (1) cultivating 'a pure and pious spirituality (*bani*)'; (2) 'belief in one *Akal Purakh* ("Timeless One" God), the *Guru Granth Sahib* and the teachings of the ten Gurus'; (3) surrender of one's will to *Akal Purakh*; (4) an encouragement to Khalsa initiation and attendance of 'divine services'; and (5) prescriptions to virtuous development and behavior, including 'compassion, honesty, generosity, patience, perseverance and humility' (P. Singh 2013, 31, 43). One major point of difference is the proscription in the code against astrology, which is a subject that is given serious attention by many 3HO/ Sikh Dharma members and in much of its literature.

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