

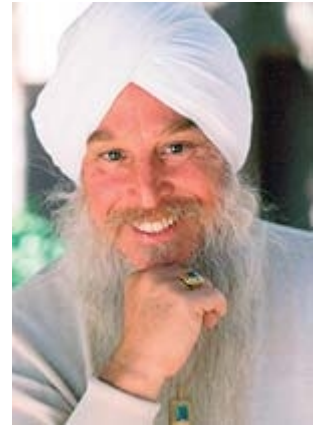
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## PROFILE

**Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD****Pioneering Integrative Approaches to Alzheimer's Care**

by Megan Steintrager

Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD, is not shy about saying, "I told you so." As founding president/medical director of the Alzheimer's Prevention Foundation International in Tucson, AZ, and author of the books *Brain Longevity*, *The Pain Cure*, *Meditation as Medicine*, and *Food as Medicine*, Khalsa says, "I've always been ahead of the curve." Considering how much nay-saying and even outright attacks his ideas about health have generated over the years, it is hard to begrudge him a little bragging, now that mainstream medicine has embraced many of his theories.



It has been a long road to recognition for Khalsa, whose integrative medical approach to the brain and longevity incorporates meditation, stress reduction, diet modification, and the use of supplements. Not long after he established his foundation in 1993, a television crew in search of a medical expose met him at his front door. "Is it true you're trying to steal old people's money by telling them you can help them stave off Alzheimer's disease?" the television anchorperson demanded to know.

A lot has changed in the past 10 years. In May 2003, Khalsa was asked to testify before Congress about his integrative approach to preventing and treating Alzheimer's disease. He also met with US Surgeon General Richard Carmona, MD. "He turned to me and said, 'Your work should now be considered mainstream,'" Khalsa says. "It was as if all my hard work of the past decade had finally received the recognition it deserved."

Khalsa says he realized he wanted to treat patients—or "healing partners," as he calls them—with an integrative approach that utilized a range of healing modalities. Born in Cleveland and raised in Florida, Khalsa graduated from Creighton University School of Medicine in Omaha, NE, and trained in anesthesiology at the University of California in San Francisco, where he held the prestigious post of chief resident and was on track to becoming a professor of obstetrics.



*Dr. Khalsa with US Surgeon General Richard Carmona, MD*

**Medicine and Meditation**

Khalsa says that one day, he had "a powerful calling and longing to go to New Mexico" where he took a position as a clinical anesthesiologist at Lovelace Medical Center in Albuquerque. Having practiced what he calls "basic stretchy" yoga in medical school, as well as transcendental meditation "for stress reduction and energy" during his residency in San Francisco, Khalsa found a Kundalini yoga center and tried a class. "Out came this tall, skinny guy with a long red beard and a turban, and he started doing these very powerful breathing exercises which I enjoyed," says Khalsa. "After about 10 minutes, I thought, 'Wow, that's for me.' I continued taking the classes, not thinking that I was going to totally change my life."

Khalsa had become increasingly interested in Kundalini yoga and the Sikh religion followed by many Kundalini practitioners, which he has since adopted. In 1981, he attended an advanced meditation course led by Yogi Bhanjan. "When I met Yogi Bhanjan, I had a very powerful awakening. Some people talk about past-life or near-death experiences; to me, this was a future-life experience. At that moment, I realized I no longer had to use powerful anesthetic drugs to put these people to sleep, but could use these new things I was learning—such as nutrition, supplements, stress management, exercise, and the like—to help people wake up and heal their bodies, minds, and spirits."

Khalsa continued working as an anesthesiologist but also began building his knowledge of integrative medicine. "When I was a chief resident in anesthesiology, I went to the highest-level medical conferences," says Khalsa. "I used that same desire to learn and that same interest in science but I sought out leaders in the alternative medicine field." He studied with Yogi Bhanjan, who taught him about alternative medicine, life extension, nutrition, supplements, meditation, and yoga. He also took basic and advanced training in mind-body medicine at the Mind-Body Institute at Harvard Medical School under the tutelage of Dr. Herbert Benson, whose best-selling book *The Relaxation Response* introduced the medical benefits of meditation to a mass audience. Khalsa also received certification in medical acupuncture from UCLA.

In addition to advancing his medical training, Khalsa studied with the acclaimed holistic nutritionist Bernard Jensen at his Hidden Valley Health Ranch, as well as with Paavo Airola, whose book *How to Get Well* advanced the idea of food as medicine. “I studied with high-level nutritional masters because there were no doctors back then who knew anything about nutrition,” he says.

Using his growing knowledge of integrative medicine, in 1987 Khalsa helped develop the Southwest’s first holistic pain program at Lovelace. In 1990, he became the founding director of the Acupuncture/Stress Medicine and Chronic Pain Program at the University of Arizona College of Medicine campus at Maricopa Medical Center in Phoenix. “I began reviewing the literature on stress medicine and came across something that was earth shattering to me and life changing,” says Khalsa. That discovery—that chronic stress releases cortisol in the bloodstream, and cortisol causes the death of cells in the brain’s memory center—has recently received a lot of attention in the mainstream medical press.

“I came to the realization that Alzheimer’s disease and memory loss, whether age-related memory loss or what they now call mild cognitive impairment, is really in large measure a disease of lifestyle,” says Khalsa. “It’s unfortunate that they’re spending billions of dollars looking for one magic bullet drug when 90% of the things that can be done to help prevent and reverse Alzheimer’s are things we can do for ourselves: eat right, take supplements, manage stress, and exercise.”

After reaching these conclusions, Khalsa and his wife Kirti made it their mission to help people prevent and reverse memory loss using a holistic or integrative medical program. In 1993, they formed the Alzheimer’s Prevention Foundation International, a not-for-profit integrative medicine program devoted to preventing and reversing Alzheimer’s. Khalsa also became a founding member of the American Academy of Anti-Aging Medicine.

### **Four Keys to Greater Brain Longevity**

Khalsa’s methods for helping people achieve brain health and overall longevity revolve around the idea that the brain is “flesh and blood like the rest of the body,” so “what works for the heart works for the head.” Topping Khalsa’s list of health recommendations is proper nutrition. He recommends eating copious amounts of fruits and vegetables while limiting fat to 15-20% of the diet. Those fats should be primarily unsaturated “good fats,” particularly omega-3 fatty acids.

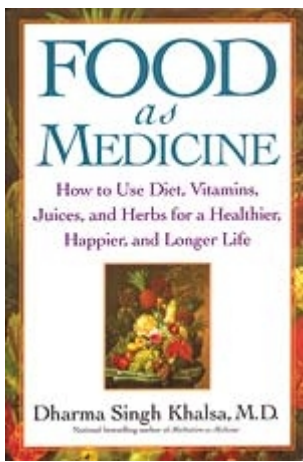
Khalsa says supplementation is an important component of any diet. Everyone, he says, should take a high-potency multivitamin and mineral supplement. In addition, he puts a scoop of the Life Extension Mix in his fruit smoothie every morning, along with his own Longevity Green Drink, which he says is similar to the green powders sold by Life Extension. “I drink that and I don’t think about food or energy until about 12 o’clock,” says Khalsa.

In addition to supplements such as vinpocetine, Huperzine A, and galantamine that Khalsa recommends for people who already have symptoms of Alzheimer’s disease, he recommends several brain-specific and general anti-aging nutrients for people who want to prevent the disease. Khalsa says vitamin E has been shown to slow the progression of Alzheimer’s. Coenzyme Q10 tops his list for heart and brain health. “One of the leading researchers on coenzyme Q10 told me they should put it in drinking water because it’s so powerful,” says Khalsa. “It’s an indispensable brain-specific and antiaging nutrient.” He suggests alpha lipoic acid for overall health and life extension.

Khalsa also believes that there is strong evidence that ginkgo is as effective as conventional medicine in helping to improve the symptoms of dementia. “Contrary to what some of the large companies’ disinformation campaigns would have you believe, I think ginkgo does help people who already are ‘normal’ improve their cognitive function.” Another brain-longevity supplement that Khalsa thinks has been overlooked by mainstream medicine is phosphatidylserine. “It fights cortisol and stress, and improves mood, neurotransmitter function, and nutrients getting to the brain cells,” says Khalsa. “It has been shown to slow memory loss. I think it is a tragedy that because the drug companies can’t patent it, they don’t promote it to the doctors.”



*Dr. Khalsa teaches a meditation class at the Omega Institute.*



The last supplement Khalsa recommends for everyone is DHA or other omega-3 fatty acids. “It is crucial to supplement your diet with an omega-3,” Khalsa advises. “It insulates the nerve fibers, improves attention, concentration, and focus, and is very good for the heart, overall longevity, and anti-aging.”

The second step in Khalsa’s program is stress reduction. “This is critically important because the chronic stress we’re under releases cortisol from our adrenal glands, which in small amounts we need to get out of bed in the morning but in large amounts has been proven to turn your brain into a toxic dump,” says Khalsa. “It’s like battery acid on the hippocampus, or memory center, of the brain. Chronic stress makes you fat, makes you have high blood pressure, and ruins your heart, immune system, and brain.” Of the many methods of stress reduction available, Khalsa first recommends meditation. “The only thing that has ever been shown to reduce cortisol is regular elicitation of the ‘relaxation response,’ or meditation,” he says. “Meditation is the most natural form of anti-aging longevity medicine. The body has an incredible ability to bring itself back into balance if we give it a chance, and meditation is the most powerful way to bring the body back into balance.”

Third on Khalsa’s list is exercise, for both body and brain. “It doesn’t have to be anything like running a triathlon,” he says. “You can just walk briskly three or four times a week for 30 minutes.” Khalsa says cognitive exercises also are very important. He suggests discussing the news, a book, or movie, doing puzzles, or reading a book or magazine to stimulate the brain. He also recommends advanced meditation involving breathing exercises, fingertip positions, and sounds, and says his preliminary research shows that this sort of mind-body exercise has a therapeutic effect on the brain.

The last element in Khalsa’s brain-longevity regimen is drugs and hormones. Although he says many medications are overused, he does not advise patients to get off drugs they already are taking. Khalsa believes hormone replacement is very important and recommends replacing DHEA, pregnenolone, and testosterone. He also challenges recent studies questioning the safety of estrogen replacement therapy. “I think if the studies were done with a natural form of estrogen, you would not find the negative consequences,” says Khalsa. “That’s just my hunch.”

In addition to his books, Khalsa publishes a monthly newsletter, The Healing Zone, which can be accessed at his website, [www.drddharma.com](http://www.drddharma.com). Information on the Alzheimer’s Prevention Foundation International can be found by clicking on the organization’s website, [www.alzheimersprevention.org](http://www.alzheimersprevention.org). Khalsa will host a three-day brain longevity program in Tucson in March 2004.

Through his work, Khalsa hopes to prevent an “expensive, draining, horrible” future in which the number of people with Alzheimer’s disease is expected to quadruple in the next generation. “By following the program I put forth, we go in a different direction. We develop wisdom, spirituality, love, and the ability to give back to society and hopefully someday make this world a better place. That is one of the long-term effects of following an anti-aging program.”



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