

Transcript: Expressions, Sufi ways of life

The Sufi ways: paths towards human perfection

The journey deeper into a life lived according to God's guidance is traditionally seen as being threefold. These three stages go with the keywords *islam*, *iman* and *ihsan* [Q. **49:13-14; 16:90**].¹ The first stage, *islam*, is the outer submission of every human act in obedience to the will of God, as transmitted by the Prophet. The second stage, *iman*, is faith based on the revealed Word of God in the Qur'an. Now we turn to the third stage, *ihsan*, which is "living the good and beautiful," and is normally spoken of as "to worship God as if you see him". This is a wide term, which applies to all Muslims, and can be thought of as "authentic religious experience". It is often associated with the term Sufism.

Sometimes this is referred to as the mystical dimension of Islam; a journey into the depths of the human heart and also the ascent of the heart to God. The heart is seen as the centre of life: of consciousness, intelligence and intentionality. The heart can thus be seen as the true “self”. This heart or self needs to be “polished” or purified so that it radiates the light of God through the entire person in both thoughts and actions. This invisible spiritual presence, sometimes called the love of God, permeates all aspects of Islam.

In a text often quoted amongst the sufis, God says, “I was a hidden treasure, so I loved to be known. Hence I created the creatures so that I might be known”. The great sufi poet Rumi uses the image of God as a beautiful woman sitting on a rooftop, who throws a stone into the crowds of people down below. The stone is the creation. It is not made to be admired in itself but rather to draw attention to God who created it. In this way, the act of God provokes the response of love, worship, service and obedience on the part of human beings. Bringing forth this response is the heart of the sufi way of living constantly in the love of God.

How is this to be done? The key verse often quoted here is Q. 3:31, “Say [Muhammad], if you love God, follow me: God will love you and forgive you your sins”. Here we see clearly that imitating Muhammad is the key to living a life that pleases God and thus will be rewarded by being drawn into the love of God. Muhammad is *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being, so those who seek

[illegible]

God and his Messenger, He will not stint anything of [the reward of] your works. Indeed God is All-forgiving, All-merciful.

Q. 16:90 Indeed God commands justice and kindness and generosity towards relatives, and he forbids indecency, wrong, and aggression. He advises you, so that you may be reminded.

In this way, the spiritual quest of the Muslim is like an ascent towards the divine presence, or something of a *mi'raj* [Q. **53:11-12** Hadith].⁴

Two broad categories were seen to emerge in sufi practice. These were known by the Arabic terms *sukr*, which is often translated as “intoxication” (or enraptured), and *sahw*, often translated as “sobriety” (or reserved).

Those characterised by intoxication became overcome by the presence of God. They tended to stress the presence of God everywhere, the nearness of God and the possibility of ultimate union with God. Their experience was generally expressed through poetry, which contained themes of love, intimacy and joy at finding “the eternal source within”. Two of the great Persian sufi poets associated with this school were Rumi (1207-1273) and Hafiz (c.1325-1390).

Some went as far as speaking of God as an all-embracing unity, in which the sufi was united with God in their very being. They had a particular understanding of the Hadith of Muhammad that says, “God was, and nothing was with him”. As God is outside of time, the verb here is also timeless: so God was, is and will be the only truly existent being, and they longed to be united with God in this existence; indeed, at the extreme end of this school, there were those who spoke of “losing the delusion of ‘the self’ as being independent of God”.

Those characterised by sobriety tended to stress the difference between the creator and the creature, the otherness of God and the loving servanthood of the human being. They generally wrote in prose, which focused on the themes of wonder, awe, majesty, and fear of God, including God’s vengeance and wrath. Rather than direct experience, they sought a deeper knowledge of God. They rejected notions of union with God and emphasised a spirituality of action in conformity with God’s revealed ethical will. Abu'l Qasim al-Junayd (d.910) and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (1292-1350) might be mentioned as masters of this school.

Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), who counselled people to “see with both eyes” or to keep a balance between these two schools, was the master of the esoteric knowledge of Islam or a form of gnosis. He spoke of direct knowledge of the self and of God that could flow freely through the purified heart. Through this process of purification, the veils of the heart were lifted by God so that one could see the true reality of things. The unpurified heart does not see with the clarity of God, like being constantly in the shade, but through the purification of knowledge, one was able to see things “from the sunny side”, from the true perspective of God.

⁴ Q. **53:11-12** The heart [of Muhammad] did not deny what it saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?

It is reported from the

Within the sufi tradition different groups or *tariqas* were formed, who follow different practices or systems to journey towards their ultimate goal. These are often referred to as Sufi Orders, but not in the sense of a monastic order, more an established system or path associated with the group and its teachers. Most are based around repeated rituals of *dhikr*. These may consist of certain phrases that are repeated and counted on a string of beads called a *misbah*, *tasbeih* or *subha*. Some groups chant *dhikr* aloud, either alone or in a sufi gathering or circle. Often *dhikr* involves the regulation of the breath, so that certain phrases are said as one breathes in and out. The tempo of both chanting and breathing can vary. Some groups concentrate on silent *dhikr*; other groups add music or rhythm to the chanting. The use of bodily movement has also been incorporated by some groups, this may be rhythmic swaying, bowing or jumping, or spinning round on an axis (as in the whirling of the dervishes). Under the supervision of a *shaykh* (f. *shaykah*, a sufi teacher or spiritual guide), the use of music, movement or control of the breath can lead to changes in the composition of blood gases and so bring the devotee to an altered state of consciousness.

Maulana Raza recounts the experience of the remembrance of God in a sufi circle

This is a very moving experience for those who join these *dhikr* circles. In fact the concept is based upon one of the verses on the Holy Qur'an where God says, that indeed with the remembrance of Allah you achieve the real inner peace and satisfaction. That can be done in isolation and that can be done in a circle. When we sit in a circle it is very moving, we feel we're sharing our experience with some other fellow Muslim brothers and it brings some sort of influence that goes deep down into our hearts and it is really relaxing and refreshing also.

A typical pattern amongst many sufi *tariqas* is to progress along a series of stations or *maqamat*. In some systems there are twenty stations through which one must pass in order without missing any. The length of time that one spends in a station is under the direction of the *shaykh* who sets exercises to be done until a certain spiritual character has been reached through the blessing of God. Such stations are given names like repentance (*tawbat*), conversion (*inabat*), renunciation (*zuhd*) and trust in God (*tawakkul*). Having passed through these stations, most sufis hold that once attained they are never withdrawn. One is then in a disposition to have a higher state bestowed by God. These states or *ahwal* are held to be more fleeting and have names such as love (*mahabba*) and yearning to be constantly with God (*shawq*).

The Prophet Muhammad is the key to understanding the sufi system. His life was spent in seeking the pleasure of God and being filled with the ultimate awareness of and closeness to God. He was *al-insan al-kamil*, the perfect human being. He became the first teacher or *shaykh* to his companions on the sufi path. He passed on to them the hidden knowledge contained in the Qur'an and wisdom that was given to him by God. They in turn became *shaykhs* to those who took them as teachers and guides. In this way, a spiritual lineage or *silsila* was created whereby contemporary sufi *shaykhs* can trace their *silsila*, from disciple to teacher, all the way back to the Prophet himself.

One of these *silsilas* is traced back through the Caliph Abu Bakr, but all the rest go back through Ali, the son-in-law and cousin of Muhammad, who the Shi'a hold to be the rightful successor of the Prophet and heir to his esoteric knowledge, the first Imam, and the Sunnis respect as the fourth Caliph. Therefore those who follow the sufi ways can be found in both Sunni and Shi'a communities.

Trying to pin down a precise definition of the sufi ways is not possible. For some, this means an organised system in one of the sufi *tariqas*, for others, especially amongst the Shi'a, it is much more an individual experience. The most widely accepted “path to human perfection” was simply to follow the life and practice of Muhammad as closely as possible and to be filled with devotion to the Prophet: “an imitation and celebration of the Prophet”. There were those who developed their sufi way into a kind of religious order of chivalry, especially when men were needed to fight in *jihads*, to defend the borders of the Muslim territories, from Morocco in the west to the far eastern borders during the Ottoman period. Some went beyond all generally accepted norms, like the Qalandars from the 13th century onwards, who lived a wandering life of voluntary poverty, celibacy and license, ignoring all social conventions and outer observances.

Some Muslim individuals and groups will want nothing to do with sufi practices. They regard the whole issue as deviating from the pure practice of Islam, which is based on Qur'an and Sunna understood in a literal way and regulated by the Shari'a. Such Muslims point to those sufis who have become so rapt in ecstasy that they have lost contact with the basic duties and practices of Islam and highlight the risk of exploiting the innocent. There have been a small minority of sufis who have taught that once one ascends higher on the sufi path, the outer forms of the Shari'a no longer apply. The majority of sufi groups are adamant about the need to observe the full Shari'a at all times.