

CHAPTER VI

The Cultivation of Spiritual Life

A lightly edited excerpt from Chapter 6, "The Cultivation of Spiritual Life", by Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah

Islam envisages for man a discipline for his life as a whole, material as well as spiritual. But there is no denying the fact that owing to differences of individual temperaments, certain people would specialize in certain specialties and not in others. Even if one were to concentrate on the spiritual side of one's existence, he would still remain more or less attached to the other occupations of life for his nourishment, for the sake of society of which he is a member, and so on.

200. In his celebrated exposé of his teaching on faith and submission and the best method of these two, the Prophet Muhammad defined this last point in the following terms: "**As to the embellishment (*ihsan*) of conduct, so render thy service unto God as if thou seest Him: even though thou doest not see Him, yet He seeth thee.**" This beautification, the best and most beautiful method of devotion or service unto God, is the spiritual culture of Islam. "Service unto God" is a most comprehensive term, and includes not merely the cult, but also relates to human conduct throughout life. The most cultured from the spiritual point of view, are those who abide most closely by the will of God in all their acts, thoughts and beliefs.

201. Questions concerning this discipline form the subject matter of mysticism. The term 'mysticism' has several synonyms in Islam: *Ihsan* (which we find also used in the above-mentioned exposé of the Prophet), *Qurb* (or approaching God), *Tariqat* (road, i.e., of the journey unto God), *Suluk* (journey, i.e. unto God), *Tasawwuf* (which etymologically means: to put on a woollen cloth). This last term is, curiously enough, the most currently used.

202. It is true that Muslim mystics – even as their counterparts in other civilizations – are not very eager to divulge their practices and their peculiarities to those outside the restricted circle of their disciples or confreres. This is not because there are scandalous secrets, but probably because of the fear that the man in the street may not understand why they undergo so much "useless" pain by renouncing the amenities of life; and also because ordinary people do not believe in the

personal experiences of the mystics. So the mystics think, it is better to conceal them from those who are unable to appreciate them. Incidentally it also happens that if a thing is enshrouded in secrecy, it becomes so much more cherished by those who ignore it, yet are in search of it.

203. Differences of individual temperaments have existed in the human race at all times. It goes to the credit of Islam that it has discovered certain things which it could impose on each and every person, irrespective of temperament, a minimum necessary to be shared and practised in common. This minimum necessity simultaneously not only touches spiritual but also material needs. In order to understand it well, it may be noted that all agree that the best Muslims are the immediate disciples of the Prophet, namely his companions. A study of their lives shows that from the very start they were possessed of a variety of temperaments. There was Khalid, a warrior, an intrepid soldier, on whom the Prophet was pleased, in admiration, to confer the title of "the Sword of God". There were 'Uthman and Ibn 'Awf, who were rich merchants, and the Prophet had announced the good tidings that they too belonged to the people of the Paradise. There was also Abu Dharr who detested all property, and preferred an ascetic life of mortification. We may recall a Bedouin nomad, who had visited the Prophet one day, in order to learn what were the minimum duties to merit Paradise. The Prophet had replied: **Faith in the One God, prayers five times a day, fast during the whole month of Ramadan, and the pilgrimage and payment of *zakat*-tax if one had means thereto.** The Bedouin embraced Islam, and burst forth: By God! I shall do nothing more and nothing less. When he departed, the Prophet remarked: **Whoever wishes to see a man of Paradise, let him look at him!** (cf. Bukhari and Muslim). Be it the warrior Khalid, or the wealthy 'Uthman, they never neglected the essential duties of Islam and its spirituality. Similarly Abu Dharr, Salman, Abu'd-Darda' and others who liked asceticism, did not obtain permission from the Prophet to lead, for instance, lives of recluses, to fast perpetually, to get castrated in horror of carnal pleasures, etc. On the

contrary, the Prophet enjoined them to marry, and added: **Thou hast obligations even with regard to thy own body.**' (cf. Ibn Hanbal), According to Islam, one does not belong to one's self, but to God; and it is not permitted to misuse the trust which God has reposed in us in the shape of our persons.

The Suffah

204. In the grand mosque of Madinah, there was in the time of the Prophet a special area called *Suffah*' somewhat away from the prayer hall. This was a centre of training and education, functioning under the personal supervision of the Prophet himself. A considerable number of Muslims occupied it. They devoted part of their time, during the day, to learn the Islamic way of life, not only in matters of man's relation with God, but also with other members of society. They also worked to earn their bare necessities of life, so that they might not become parasites and a burden on others. During the night, they passed their time, like the best mystics, in the observance of supererogatory (*nafal*) prayers and in meditation on God. Whether one calls this institute a convent (a *Tekkeh*, a *Khanqah*) or by any other name, there is no doubt that the inmates of the *Suffah* were more attached to spiritual practices than to material avocations. Perhaps one will not be able to know the details of the practices which the Prophet had enjoined on these early Muslim mystics, which practices must have varied according to the temperament and capacities of each individual. Yet the object being determined, there was enough liberty to select lawful means leading thereto. It may be recalled, by the way, that the Prophet once said: **"Wisdom is the lost-property of the believer; wherever he should find it, he should recover it"** (cf. Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah).

The Essence of Mysticism

205. Through mysticism, Islam envisages a rectitude of beliefs, embellishment or beautification of the acts of devotion, taking the life of the Prophet as a model to be followed in all activities of life, the amelioration of personal conduct, and the accomplishment of duties imposed by Islam.

206. It has nothing to do with the power to know invisible things, with performing miracles, or imposing one's will on others by mysterious psychic means; not even with asceticism, mortification, seclusion, meditation and the consequent sensations (which may

sometimes be means, yet not ends; or even with certain beliefs regarding the person of God (pantheism, etc); much less with what the charlatans assert, that a mystic is above the Islamic law and the necessary minimum duties imposed by it.

207. For want of a better term, one might use the word 'mysticism' which in Islam means the method of the best individual behaviour, i.e., the means by which one acquires control over one's own self, the sincerity, the realization of the constant presence of God in all one's acts and thoughts, seeking to love God more and more.

208. In the Islamic teachings, there are certain 'external' duties, such as prayer-service, fast, charity, abstaining from evil and wickedness, etc. There are also 'internal' duties, such as faith, gratitude to God, sincerity, and freedom from egoism. Mysticism is a training for this latter aspect of life. However, even the motivation of external duties are for the purification of the spirit, which is the only means of eternal salvation. In general, the mystic develops by his spiritual practices certain of his faculties and talents, which appear to the average person as miraculous; but the mystic does not seek them – he even despises them. To know invisible things, even if that becomes possible for certain persons by certain practices, is not desirable for the mystic, for these constitute the secrets of God and their premature divulgence is harmful to man in the long run. That is why the mystic does not utilize such powers even if he comes to acquire them; his aim remains always the purification of the spirit, in order to become more agreeable to the Lord. The perfect man is he who beautifies not only his outer but also his inner self, or (as mystics say) his body and his heart. For the external aspect, there is the *Fiqh* or body of Muslim law which consists of rules for one's entire outer life, such as cult, contractual relations, penalties, etc. It is however the internal aspect which is the true subject matter of mysticism. The acts of prayer- service belong to the realm of *Fiqh*, but sincerity and devotion are inner things, and belong to mysticism. Let us recall in this connection two verses of the Qur'an: "*Successful indeed are the believers who are devout in their prayer-service*" (23 : 1-2), and "*Lo the hypocrites. . . when they stand up to worship they perform it languidly and in ostentation so as to be observed by men*" (4:142). The good and bad services of worship, indicated therein, give us a clue to the understanding of what Islam requires of its adherents in all activities of life.

208/a. Islamic tradition reserves to the caliph or the head of the Muslim State not only politics (including administration of justice). but also cult, i.e., the outward practice of the religion, such as service of worship, fasting, pilgrimage. All this falls under the purview of *Fiqh* (Muslim law) developed by the different schools. In this realm, monopoly of power has been jealously imposed, although this concerns the rather less important part of our life. Sectarian differences exist among Muslims, since the death of the Prophet, as to who had the right to succeed to the Prophet in the exercise of the power regarding politics and cult. Let us leave the decision to God on the Day of Judgement, and let us occupy ourselves with our future and the defence against the enemies of God. As to the inner life, which alone determines the salvation in the everlasting Hereafter, in this sphere there are no jealousies – several persons could and did succeed the Prophet simultaneously. If the Naqshbandiyah Order of mystics seeks its authority from the Prophet through Abu Bakr, the Qadiriyyah and Suhrawardiyyah orders for instance, do the same through 'Ali, and all this among the Sunnis to whom Abu Bakr alone was the immediate successor of the Prophet in the political field. This spiritual Realm, which unites Sunnis and Shi'as, is no vapid abstraction – it has its own full fledged administrative organisation. The existence of *abdal* and *autad* or spiritual governors and administrators is known on the authority of the Prophet himself, as we read by as early an author as Ibn Sa'd. A monograph of Suyuti has collected all the traditions of the Prophet on the subject of *qutb*, *abdal* and *autad*. One need not enter into details here.

Pleasure of God

209. The common folk desire that God should love them in a sort of one way traffic without their loving Him – that He should give them well-being without their obeying Him. The Qur'an (2:165) teaches: "... *those who believe are stauncher in their love for God.*" Again, it indicates the traits of the best men and says (5:54): "... *a people whom He loveth and who love Him.*"

210. Obtaining Divine pleasure is not analogous to the enjoyment of material comforts, which God may give a man in order to test his gratefulness. Sometimes a man remains deprived of these comforts so that his endurance and constancy may be tested. In both cases man must show his devotion and attachment to God. This necessitates, on the one hand, abnegation of the ego by getting absorbed in the will of God, and on the other, a

constant feeling of the effective presence of God.

211. The philosophic conception of pantheism emanates from the necessity of "self-abnegation in God." For a mystic, the mere affirmation of this belief has no value, he aspires to assimilate it and feel it as a reality. Thus it is that the learned distinctions between pantheism in the sense of the unity of existence, and that of the unity of vision, or any other, are for a true mystic mere logomachy, [verbal disputation] which makes the eager traveller lose his track, and retards his arrival at his destination.

212. It may be recalled here that the Islamic notion of pantheism does not lead to the reunification of man with God. However close a man may approach God, there is still a distinction, a separation, and a distance between the Creator and the created. One abnegates one's ego, but not one's person. The higher the level we attain, the more does God speak with our tongue, act with our hand, and desire with our heart ¹ (cf. Bukhari). There is an ascension and a journey of man towards God, but there is never a confusion between the two. Thus it is that a Muslim does not use the term 'communion,' which may imply a union and a confusion. The Muslims designate the spiritual journey by the term *mir'aj*, which means a ladder, an ascension, which varies according to individuals and their capacities. The highest imaginable level a human being can attain is the one that has been reached by the holy Prophet Muhammad. And this experience of his is also called *mi'raj*. So, in a state of consciousness and wakefulness, the Prophet had the vision (*ru'ya*) of being transported to heaven and graced with the honour of the Divine Presence. Even there, in this state beyond time and space, the Qur'an (53:9) indicates formally that the distance between God and the Prophet, "*was of two bows' length or even nearer,*" and this graphic description lays emphasis simultaneously on the closeness of proximity as well as the distinction between the two. The Prophet himself employed the term *mi'raj* in connection with the common faithful, when he indicated that "**The service of worship is the *mi'raj* of the believer.**" Evidently to each according to his capacity and his merit.

213. The spiritual journey has a whole series of stages, and it is only gradually that one traverses them. In the life of the Prophet Muhammad, we see that he began with retreats in the cave of Hira: then came the Meccan period, in which there was in store for him suffering and self-abnegation for the sake of the Divine cause. It is

only after the *Hijrah* that he permits himself (under Divine instructions always) to oppose injustice with force. It is quite possible that someone, who pretends to be a dervish, should only be so in appearance, being in reality a wolf disguised as a sheep. Similarly it is quite possible that a king, with all the powers and treasures accumulated in his hands, should still be in practice a saint, who does not at all profit by these things, but makes a great self-sacrifice, in the course of accomplishing his duties, by renouncing his personal comforts.

214. To break the ego, the first requirement is a feeling of humility, which should be developed. Pride is considered to be a sin against God. Based on a *Hadith*, al-Ghazali says, "ostentation is the worship of self, therefore it is really a kind of polytheism."

215. Temperaments differ, that is why the roads also are numerous. One insists on the need of a guide and master. One who has studied medicine privately, without passing through a period of apprenticeship or even attending the courses of study with proficient doctors, is not allowed to practise medicine. The cases are rare where one sees all one's defects. Rarer still are instances of people who correct themselves immediately. A master is necessary in the first instance to indicate to us our defects and also the way in which these are to be removed. There is a constant development and a perpetual evolution in the individual, and the master spares us a great deal of unnecessary effort. If one were not to profit by experiences of the past, and if each newborn were to recommence each new task by falling back on his own individual self, there would be no growth of culture and civilization – which may be defined as the accumulated knowledge and practice of generations of our ancestors. The pupil has a regard for the judgement and counsel of his master, that he never has for his comrades and equals. After theoretical studies, one passes through a probationary period, for learning their practical application. This is as true of the material sciences as of the spiritual ones. There are many things which one can never learn by mere reading or listening; their practical application under the supervision of an experienced master is always useful, if not indispensable. Furthermore, mere knowledge does not suffice, it should be assimilated and become second nature.

216. Mystics recommend four practices: eat less, sleep less, speak less and frequent people less. "Less" does not mean complete abnegation, which is sometimes

impossible (such as is eating and sleeping), and always undesirable; there must always be moderation. One should eat to live, not live to eat. To eat for the purpose of obtaining the energy to accomplish the will and the commandments of God, is an act of devotion. And to diminish nourishment and become weakened to the extent of diminishing spiritual productivity is a sin. Sleep is necessary for health, and is a duty imposed on man. But laziness, which causes us to remain in bed too long, affects our spiritual progress. Sleeping less does not mean spending more time attaining material needs, but in finding more time for the practices of devotion and piety. Speaking less means diminishing frivolous talk, and avoidance, if possible, of all evil talk. It is often our habit to give good counsel to others, but to forget to practise it ourselves. Frequenting people less, means refraining from unnecessary talk and wasting time in needless contacts. To do a good turn to others, and to be occupied with the realization of things which could procure the pleasure of the Lord are rather desirable frequentations. However, it should not be forgotten that the needs of the individuals differ according to their stage of evolution; one does not give the same advice to an expert master as to a young novice. Mundane frequentations often occasion temptations, wasting useful time, and the forgetting of our more important obligations. It may be permitted to add a fifth counsel: spend less, meaning on luxuries, flirtation, and personal pleasures. The amount thus saved could be used for purposes dear to us but for which we have no money (in our spend-thrift habits) to contribute our two cents. The five counsels may constitute five principles of economy in Islam, both spiritual and material.

Special Practices

217. One has to remember God at all times. The essential feature is remembering by the heart. But concentration not being constant one employs physical methods for strengthening the presence of the spirit, and focusing of thought on the Divine person. The Qur'an (33:41-2) says: "*O ye who believe! Remember God with much remembrance. And glorify Him early and late.*" Again (3:191): "*Such as remember God, standing, sitting and reclining and meditate on the creation of the heavens and the earth (and say:) our Lord, Thou createdst not this in vain; glory be to Thee; Preserve us from the doom of Fire.*" There are litanies, in which some formulas are repeated a number of times; there are prayers which one pronounces every day as a habit. This is done aloud or in a low voice, but all should be related

invariably and always to God, to His person or to His attributes, and never to created beings. Even if the subject be the Prophet Muhammad, for gratitude and admiration, the approach should be always through God, and never praying to Muhammad himself independently to do something for us. For instance "O God, incline to Muhammad and take him into Thy protection," or "O God resuscitate Muhammad in the glorious place which Thou hast promised him, and accept his intercession in our favour," etc. For developing concentration of thought, the mystics sometimes live in seclusion, or retreat, stop respiration for moments, close the eyes, and concentrate on the throbbing of the heart while thinking of God, etc. They also say that there are three grades of remembrance of God – to remember only His name, to remember His person by means of and through His name, and to remember His person without having the need of His name or any other means. That these practices were recommended by the Prophet himself and that they are not of a foreign origin, it may be recalled that Abu Hurairah had a rosary, made of a thread, with 2,000 knots to serve as many beads, and he repeated a certain prayer on it every night, (Ibn Fadlallah al-'Umari, *Masalik al-Absar*, vol. 5 MS. of Istanbul).

218. Among other practices, one may mention a life of asceticism, self-mortification, and meditation particularly on death and the final judgement. For Islam these are not ends, but only the means, rather temporary and provisional, for the purpose of mastering and breaking the ego. Everything that one permits to one's self in this world is divided into two categories – necessities and luxuries. One can never renounce the necessities, for that would be suicide. To commit suicide is religiously forbidden in Islam, for we do not belong to ourselves, but to God; and to destroy something before its full-fledged realization is to go against the will of God. As for luxuries, if they are not made the aim of our existence in this world, they are lawful. One can renounce them in order to dominate over one's animality. One can also do so in order to help those who do not possess even the necessities of life, or perhaps as a penitence. But it is not permitted to act in an exaggerated manner or out of all proportion. A virile man who makes an effort to lead a chaste life has greater merit than the one who destroys his desires by means, for instance, of a surgical operation. One who has no capacity for evil has no merit in comparison with the one who has the most perfect capacity for it and yet abstains voluntarily from it, for fear of God.

219. Self-mortification, abstinence and other spiritual practices enhance certain faculties, yet the acquisition of such faculties, however miraculous they might be, is not the aim of one who travels toward God. One seeks to realize acts, but not the sensations which are produced thereby automatically. Even an infidel may acquire certain of the faculties of saints, yet without the ultimate salvation. The mystic is continually directed towards his destination, and does not think of, much less profit by, these incidents of the saintly journey.

220. The life of a Sufi, dervish or mystic begins with repentance for past sins and the reparation, as far as possible, of harms done to other people. God pardons harms done to His own rights, but not those to the rights of other creatures; it is these latter who alone can pardon. It is only then that one can march on the path leading to the Lord. It is not the monopoly of any person or class or caste. It is within the reach of everybody, and it is the duty of each and everyone to take this road. The provisions for this journey are two-fold – obedience to God and constantly remembering Him. Obedience is easier in the sense that one knows what one has to do and what the will of the Lord is. He has revealed His will and His prescriptions through His chosen prophets, in order that they communicate them to the common folk.

221. God has sent innumerable prophets. If their teachings differ in detail, it is not because God has changed His opinion, but only because, in His mercy and wisdom, the evolution or deterioration of the human capacities necessitated a change in the rules of conduct and in the details. Although in the essentials of their teachings, particularly in those which concern the relation of man with God, prophets do not differ, (and the Qur'an lays a strong emphasis on it) it is part of the obedience of man to God's orders to abide by the latest disposition of His will. If God taught men something through the prophet Abraham, for instance, it will not be disobedience to abandon it for abiding by the teachings of the prophet Moses, because he brought in his time the latest disposition of the orders of the same Law-giver. What is more, to neglect the directions of Moses and continue to practise the teachings of Abraham would be flagrant disobedience to God. It is thus that man should practise, turn by turn, the messages of God brought by successive prophets, the latest of whom being Muhammad. It is thus that with all his respect for the previous prophets, a Muslim cannot abide except by the latest disposition of the will of God communicated to man. A Muslim venerates the Torah, the Psalter and the

Gospel as the word of God, yet he abides by the latest and the most recent of the words of God, namely the Qur'an. Whoever remains attached to the preceding laws, cannot be considered, by the Legislator, as law-abiding and obedient.

Conclusion

222. Man being composed simultaneously of body and soul, of an outer and an inner existence, the harmonious progress and balanced evolution towards perfection require that attention should be paid to both these aspects of man. Mysticism or spiritual culture in Islam envisages the diminution of the Ego and the ever increasing realization of the presence of God. To be absorbed in the will of God does not at all mean an immobility; far from that. In innumerable verses, the Qur'an urges man to action and even to compete in the search for the Divine pleasure by means of good actions. Not to follow one's own evil desires, but to abide by the will of God alone, does not lead to inaction. Only that happens which God wills. Yet not knowing the will of God, which remains concealed from men, man must always continue his effort, even though failure follows failure, when trying to attain the goal which he conscientiously believes to be good and in conformity with the revealed commandments of God. This notion of a dynamic predestination, which urges one to action and resignation to the will of God, is well explained in the following verses of the Qur'an (57: 22-2?): *"Naught of disaster befalleth on the earth or in your souls but it is in a Book (Prescription) before We bring in into being – lo! that is easy for God – that ye grieve not for the sake of that which hath escaped you, nor ye exult because of that which ye had been given; God loveth not prideful boasters."* Man should always think of the grandeur of God, and vis-à-vis this, of his own humility, as well as of the day of the Resurrection when the Lord will demand individual accounts. The Qur'an says (29:69): *"As for those who strive in Us, We surely guide them to Our paths, and lo! God is with the good."*

1. Literally: *"I become his ear with which he tears, his eye with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, his feet with which he walks."*