

# ISLAMIC MYSTICISM

by **Mohammad Manzoor Nomani**

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A very special branch of Faith, through which it is carried to perfection, is Ehsan as the Prophet's Traditions describe it, or *Tasawwuf*, as it is known in common parlance. In plain words, it means the creation of a real, living consciousness of God -- a consciousness so strong and vivid as if one had actually seen Him, sweeping aside every trace of doubt and uncertainty. When this consciousness becomes complete it forges a bond of loyalty with God that fills the heart with His remembrance, His love and an intense awareness of His Might; it becomes the essence, the ruling spirit, of one's existence, of all one's thought and action, in prayer, in morality, in social behaviour, in monetary dealings, and, so forth. All that one does then is inspired, governed and regulated by this all-embracing belief and overpowering realization. One's external life gets completely pervaded by this internal feeling.

Ehsan or Tasawwuf, thus, represents the very pinnacle of Faith. It is the supreme standard of one's spiritual state. One is perfect in his faith [or] not according to the measure with which he is blessed with this wealth. The famous Tradition of the Prophet consisting of the dialogue between Him and the Archangel Gabriel is a pointer in this direction. The manner in which the term *Ehsan* occurs in it after Iman and Islam testifies to the truth of the assertion that *Ehsan* marks the ultimate stage in the evolution of Faith.

Briefly, the Tradition says that one day the holy Prophet was sitting with some of the Companions that Gabriel came in, disguised as a traveler from a far-off place. He took his seat close to the Prophet and began to ask him some questions. The first was, "What is Iman (Faith) ?" And, the second, "What is Islam?" The Prophet gave suitable replies to his questions. Then he asked, "What is *Ehsan* ?" The Prophet answered, "*Ehsan* means to worship God as if one is actually seeing Him or is being seen by Him." (In other; words, the stage of *Ehsan* is reached when awareness of God becomes the greatest reality [of] one's life and one's every act is performed under a constant sense of His presence for although man cannot see God - it is just not possible in this material world-God does see him all the time).

This state of sublimity can exist only when faith has worked itself out to the highest degree and become one's life-breath. It was for the attainment of this state that the Prophet would beg fervently to God. **"O God!" he would say, "Let such be my state that I feared Thee and revered Thee as if I was seeing Thee constantly till (at last) my time came and I went up to join Thee,"**

This condition is known among the Sufis (Muslim mystics) as *Huzoori* (presence) and *Yad-Dasht* (remembrance) and *Nisbat* (affinity), and when anyone is described by them as *Saheb-i-Nishbat* it denotes that he has arrived at it in a considerable way. When this state of spirituality is reached, a person gets permanently attuned to God and becomes immune to all kinds of doubts and misgivings concerning His Being. Setting forth his own experience in one of his letters, Hazrat Mujaddid Alf-Sani says: "Acting on the postulate: 'Acknowledge publicly the boons conferred by God,' a Dervish of this (*Naqshbandi*) school narrates about himself that all doubts and fears have totally disappeared from his heart, so much so that even if he lives for a thousand years like the (Hebrew) Prophet, Noah [1](#) even if he himself strives for it for many a long year.

As a natural outcome of this all-pervading effulgence of faith, this all engulfing sense of Divine presence all other ties and attachments are merged and lose their identity the one great allegiance to the Almighty, and external acts, such as, love, friendship, enmity and social and business intercourse begin to be gone through and carried out for His sake alone. A Tradition of " the Prophet on the subject of *Ehsan* tells that "a person whose state may be that when he loves, he loves for the sake of God and when he hates, he hates for the sake of God, and when he gives, he gives for the sake of God, and when he withholds his hand from giving, he withholds it for the sake of God - he has attained perfection in his faith."

The most exalted position in this respect was that of the Prophet. He operated at the highest level to which a man can evolve his destiny from the point of view of faith and *Ehsan*. In his life there was contained the most ideal blending of knowledge and awareness, and piety and the fear of God. He used often to say of himself, "**No one among you fears God more than me, no one reveres Him more intensely than me and no one possesses a greater knowledge and a more complete awareness of Him than I do.**"

From the Prophet, his Companions had received their share of this celestial wealth, proportionate to their aptitude and circumstances, and the possession of this very commodity has remained throughout the high merit of the Sufi-saints of Islam. All their special spiritual exertions - remembrance, meditation and acts of self-purgation - have had no other aim than the acquirement of it. As *Hazrat* Gangohi, a Sufi-saint of the current century, writes. "This is not a single doubt or temptation can creep into it. Nay, it cannot creep into it the ultimate goal of all systems (of Sufism) ... Why had holy Companions sacrificed all that they had - life, family, property and everything? What had they seen? It was simply because that they had acquired absolute faith [in] God through their association with the Prophet [this] was, with them, the measure of all things. How did Abdul Qadir Jilani, Moinuddin Chishti and Bahauddin Bukhari climb to greatness? Through this very faith." A few lines later, the great Sufi goes on to observe: "This forging of [a] link (with God) is called *Ehsan*. The raising of the Prophet was for it's sake alone and all the holy Companions were endowed with it in different degrees. The saints of the *Ummat* then produced it through another way. [2](#)

The real thing, therefore, is the acquirement of the light of faith and the inner feeling of *Ehsan*. The holy Companions had realized this state through the fullness of their love for and devotion to the Prophet, through the intimateness of their association with him, and through dedication themselves to a life of virtue under his advice and direction and making utmost sacrifices in the cause of God. At the death of the Prophet, the Companions, both individually and as a body, functioned as his successors and representatives in the line, and as long as they remained in the world the exalted state of *Ehsan* could be gained by sitting at their feet.

When the Companions, too, were gone and symptoms of moral and spiritual degradation began to make themselves manifest in the Muslim society with the lapse of time, [a] stage came when the high-souled men in the *Ummat*, 'cherished in their hearts the heritage of *Ehsan* [and] occupied the same elevated position in their branch as *Mujtahids* in *Fiqh*, [and this] stirred them into activity. Seeing that the inspiri[at]ional society of the Prophet and the Companions was [no longer] available and the Muslim Millet was moving down steadily from the ideal of righteous-doing to corruption, they evolved certain methods for the kindling of the flame of faith in the hearts and the generation of that feeling of God-realization which is the essence of *Ehsan*. These methods included excessive remembrance of God, meditation, and the control and discipline desires and impulses of the self.

Their utility is self-evident and there is a clear proof also of their correctness and effectiveness in the original sanctions of the Faith and the *Shariat*. The bulk of the *Ummat* has consistently reposed its trust in the soundness of these methods and in the integrity of the holy men who had worked them out, and they have, further, received the greatest of sanctions - the sanction of time. These last two factors, more than anything else, place the worth and merit of the practices indicated above beyond the realm of controversy.

For a thousand years and more, the finest elements in the community, from the point of view of faith, have affirmed that the system in vogue among the Sufis for spiritual self-evolution and the creation and strengthening of God-consciousness is fundamentally correct and efficacious in practice. Who can deny that hundreds and thousands of men have derived an immense benefit as a result of their spiritual association with each of the leading Sufi-saints like Khwaja Maroof Karkhi, Bishar Hafi, Siri Saqati, Shafiq Balakhi, Bayazeed Bustami, Junaid Baghdadi, Abu Bakr Shibli, Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani, Sheikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi, Sheikh Ahmad Rifai, Sheikh Abul Hasan Shazli, Khwaja Osman Harooni, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, and Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshband, and the saints of the last three centuries of the present millennium of the class of Khwaja Baqi Billah, Imam Rabbani, Mujaddid Alf-Sani Sheikh Ahmad Sarhindi and their deputies, and Shah Waliullah Dehlavi and Syed Ahmad Shaheed, and countless of other devoted men of God, who like them, were adorned with the virtue of *Ehsan* and functioned as the leaders of this field during their time.

Anyone who possesses the briefest acquaintance with these luminous links in the chain of Sufistic achievement will agree that what they had attained had come to them through no other channel. How, then, can it be possible to doubt the soundness and efficacy of a system that has produced such exquisite specimens of religious perfection, so many splendid men of faith and conviction, who may justly be described as the spiritual blossom and glory of Islam?

Of course, some sections of the *Ummat* have been guilty of error and folly in varying measures and both of a conceptual and a practical nature in the field of *Tasawwuf*, as in the other fields of Faith. But, just as the process of caution and correction has been kept in operation steadily in the other fields through the *Ulema* and the *Mujtahids*, in this field, too, it has been the same with Sufis of deep learning and penetrating vision coming up from time to time from God to straighten its curves and to remove its impurities [3](#). Furthermore, it does not become anyone to reject a whole

structure of belief and practice simply because some sections of its followers have committed some mistakes.

Such, in brief, is the meaning of *Ehsan* and the place it holds in Islam. The path by which it is reached is known popularly, as *Sulook* or *Tareeq*. <sup>4</sup> It is an accepted fact that to undertake a journey along this path one must place oneself in the hands of an expert guide who can show the way and furnish lead at each step in the correct direction. One cannot start treating oneself (or others) for physical ailments by reading books on medicine. The same is true of the field of spiritual well-being. For spiritual treatment it is necessary to go to a spiritual physician, i.e., to a man who has attained the goal by going all the way himself and knows all its ups and downs and to follow his directions faithfully. The first duty of the pilgrim should, therefore, be to seek out a guide and a leader who, in addition to his religious and spiritual accomplishments, must also be suited to his natural disposition and to commit himself to his charge ungrudgingly. This is called *Iradat*.

Tragically true, as it is, that such accomplished men of God are becoming scarce day by day but the world is not quite empty of them. There do exist men about whom it can be said, subject to the limitations of human judgment and understanding, of course, that to their lot has fallen the heritage of God-consciousness which is the goal and destination of *Ehsan* and under their guidance and with proper enthusiasm and perseverance one can successfully traverse the path of *Sulook*

It is, surely, not that anyone who flourishes himself as a *Pir* <sup>5</sup> is worthy of being taken as a guide and a mentor. Everyone knows that there are both fake and genuine among religious teachers and spiritual masters, as among political leaders and physicians, and so forth. We admit that the proportion of impostors in the religious and spiritual sphere is far greater than elsewhere. But, as elsewhere, the true can be distinguished from the false without much difficulty. The experts who are blessed also with a keen understanding of the *Shariat*, like Shah Waliullah and Kazi Sanaullah of recent times, have laid down in the light of the Quran and the *Sunnah* and their own knowledge and experience, certain suggestions for recognizing men with an awakened heart and an evolved soul who can be looked up to for spiritual guidance. The elementary test is that besides piety and a strict observance of the *Shariat* their state should be such that in their company people may be reminded of God, the hold of material aspirations may weaken and the love of God and solicitude for the Hereafter grow stronger as a result of associating with them, and these qualities may also be clearly manifest in their adherents and disciples.

The seeker after *Ehsan* should, therefore, provide himself first of all with a guide of the above calibre, and if he cannot do so on his own, he may take the advice of those who are expected to be helpful in making the choice. If after listening to their advice he finds himself drawn to a saint and this feeling increases further when he comes to know him personally, he ought to turn towards him with faith and confidence, seek guidance from him and carry out his instructions loyally as a wise patient does the instructions of his physician. In such a case there will arise no occasion for disappointment and God will surely reward him in some; degree or another with the radiance of faith and the feeling of *Ehsan* by means of which one's religious state is brought to perfection, faith in the Unseen becomes as clear and firm as faith in the visible phenomena, and obtaining full riddance from all manner of spiritual doubts and misgivings one's existence truly becomes a saga of undivided love and devotion to God.

But, the path of *Tasawwuf* is a hard path. One who treads it has to pay dearly in terms of suffering and sacrifice. Only a devotee who can make it the sole object and mission of his life and is ready to forego his desires, his comfort and even his life for the sake of it can hope to do it successfully. No wonder, therefore, that the travelers along this path have always been few.

There is, however, a lesser grade of *Ehsan* which lies in the endeavour that in conjunction with loyalty to the fundamental articles of faith, one's worship and remembrance of God may attain a standard so as to impart a real heavenly joy to the heart, the moral and practical spheres of one's life may become reasonably clean at the least, and repugnance to evil and the longing for good deeds may come to one almost habitually. The yearning for these ends is present in a fair amount in our religious circles and most of the devotees nowadays go to spiritual masters with the promotion of these ideals as their object <sup>6</sup>.

The present writer is not at all competent to tender advice towards the realisation of the higher ideal embodying the true concept of *Ehsan*. For it one will have to go to an enlightened teacher and a real saint. There, however, seems no harm in taking the liberty here of advancing some suggestions regarding the lesser grade of that spiritual state specially when they do not contain anything apart from what he has learnt from the masters and are representative solely of the general principles of the Divine faith and the holy Law. The writer is further persuaded by the hope that should the reader be encouraged to put the suggestions to his advantage by acting on them, he will become entitled to as much share in the Divine reward as the latter for it is a merciful law with the Providence that "a person who guides another to virtue will be recompensed equally with him." It is in this hope and in this spirit that the following suggestions are being offered.

1 The most important thing is the soundness and integrity of faith. If there is a defect in the basic structure of a person's faith, for example, if there is a trace of polytheism in his spiritual outlook, all his endeavours will come to nought. Even if he fasted during the day and devoted his nights to

prayer throughout the year it would avail him nothing. Hence, the initial condition is doctrinal purity and wholesomeness. What has been said in this connection in the preceding chapter of the book should be enough by way of general guidance.

2 Care should be taken to learn the teachings and postulates of the religion, whether they appertain to matters like *Namaz* and *Roza*, which are obligatory for everyone, or to the general conduct of life. The course that may be best suited to one's peculiar needs and circumstances should be adopted for this purpose.

3 It is necessary to offer earnest repentance for sins of commission and omission committed in the way of God and for the life spent thus far in neglect and folly. It should also be resolved with all one's heart and strength of will to carry out in future the Divine Commands scrupulously and lead a life of loyalty and devotion to God.

It should be remembered that God demands of His servants only what lies within them to do, and that, too, without involving themselves in any great difficulty. He never calls upon man to do a thing that may be beyond his capacity or endurance. There is, in fact, so much regard for convenience in religion that if it may be hard for a person to stand up for prayer due to illness, he is permitted to offer it in the sitting posture or even while lying in bed. In the same way, he is allowed to forego the fasts of Ramadan if he be ill or in a journey. The same is the case with the other duties of religion also. It is, as such, totally wrong to suppose that to live up to the requirements of the faith is a highly taxing business. This belief is due wholly to lack of will and absence of habit. If a person makes up his mind and lets the observance of religious postulates sink into himself as a settled tendency, he will soon see that there will be no peace for him otherwise.

4 Mere mortals that we are, we are a prey to numerous weaknesses. There is the Devil, always on the lookout to lure us into sin, and there is our own sensual self. It is, therefore, not inconceivable that in spite of our sincere desire to observe the Divine ordinances and refrain from evil deeds, we may fall into error. In a situation like this, our attitude should be to seek the forgiveness of God as soon as we became morally aware of the infringement and resolve not to be guilty of it again. Repentance at the commission of a sin, provided that it is genuine, not only erases its effects altogether, but also wins for one the love and pleasure of God, As the Qur'an says, God loves those who seek forgiveness after committing a sin.

If the infringement be of a nature as to involve a sin against man also, like cruelty, injustice, back-biting, violation of or encroachment upon the rights of others, it will be necessary to make appropriate amends to the aggrieved person in addition to seeking the forgiveness of God. We have already referred in the chapter on 'Monetary Dealings and Social Conduct', to the Prophet's Tradition that on the Last Day there will be people with a huge stock of *Namaz*, *Roza*, *Zakat*, and *Haj* to their credit but, side by side with it, they will also be carrying a heavy load of wrongs perpetrated on fellow-men. The good acts of such people will then be allotted to those against whom they had transgressed, and, if the claims of the latter will still remain unsatisfied, the transgressors will be thrown into hell, all their praying and worshipping notwithstanding.

5 The significance good morals command in Faith and the crucial role they play in the spiritual evolution of man have been amply discussed in a previous chapter. It should be a primary concern with all the votaries of God and religion to adorn themselves with the best of morals. But since moral behaviour is closely related to one's innate disposition and personality, its cleansing and reformation, is more difficult than that of the other spheres of our activity. As a general rule, one is advised to exert oneself to the utmost and assume deliberately - even though one might not be actually in possession of them - the moral virtues, such as, humility, mildness, affability, love, compassion, patience, contentment, generosity, self-abnegation and sincerity and goodwill towards others, and avoid the opposite qualities like vanity, anger, stinginess, greed, jealousy, rejoicing at the misfortunes of others, and selfishness.

Insha Allah, in due course, one's personality will get cast into the new mould. A tradition of the Prophet assures that "**he who will assume chastity with an effort, God will make him chaste; he who will assume contentment with an effort, God will make him contented; he who will assume forbearance with an effort, God will make him forbearing** 7" It is said that once a Companion complained to the sacred Prophet of his own hard-heartedness upon which the Prophet advised him to make a habit of stroking gently the heads of the orphans. 8 It was a remedial measure of identical style. Other moral healers have also attested to the efficacy of this method.

6 Care should be taken to observe the prescribed modes of worship, specially the *Namaz*, in as ideal a way as possible and also to keep up the *Nafil* prayers. Among the supererogatory prayers *Tahajjud* is the most valuable. Worship, whether it takes the physical or financial form or be it a mixed one and whether it is compulsory or supererogatory, is definitely the greatest source of spiritual progress and access to God.

7 The next thing is to make the recitation of the Quran and *Zikr* 9 part of one's daily routine.

It is suggested that the formula, *Subhan Allah wa AI-Hamd-o-Lillah wa La-llah-a liallah wa Allah-o-Akbar*, and *Istighfar* and *Durood Shareef* be recited a hundred times each morning and evening. During the recitation, attention should be focused on the meanings of the words and phrases occurring in them and the heart should also be made to participate in it. It should also be confidently hoped during the act, that apart from the Divine recompense and reward that would accrue from the deed, one's soul might as well get permeated with the radiance of God's name as a result of the auspiciousness of the phrases recited.

Moreover, what is popularly known as *Tasbeeh-i-Fatima* (*Subhan Allah*, 33 times; *AI-Hamd-o-Lillah*, 33 times; *Allah-o-Akbar*, 34 times) may be recited, as far as possible, regularly after each *Namaz*. It does not take more than two minutes and, with a little care, everyone can manage it. On retiring to bed for the night the above *Tasbeeh* may be said out once again, and three times the *Kalima-i-istighfar*, viz., *Astaghflrul- lah-il-Lazi La-liaha-ilia Hual Haiyul-Oaiyum wa Atoob-o-llaih*.

A suitable time may be fixed for the daily recitation of the Qur'an. The length of the recitation is not important; it may only be a section or two. What really matters is the regularity and the correctness of the recitation and the feelings of earnestness and reverence with which it is done.

8 The aspirants are further advised to cultivate the habit of bringing the name of God on their tongues, in one form or another, at brief intervals during their hours of occupation, as for instance, by uttering *Ya Allah*, *La Ilah-a-llallah*, or the full *Kalima* or *Istighfar* every little while. After a period of conscious effort it will begin to come naturally. It is one of the ways of finding a place in the select circle of those who have been spoken of in the Qur'an in these words: Men whom neither traffic nor merchandise can divert from the remembrance of God. (Nur, 5)

After the *Isha* prayers in the night or at any other convenient hour four or five minutes may be reserved for what among the Sufis is called 'meditation of death'. During these moments, a person should contemplate on what will occur to him when death will strike him down, which is an absolute certainty; then what will his condition be when he will be buried in the grave after the necessary rituals of bathing and shrouding have been gone through and the funeral service has been said; what will he do in that dark, lonely cell of the grave? How is he to pass the long period of suspense and agony intervening between death and the Day of Final Judgment if he does not prove worthy of Divine favour and forgiveness?

And, finally, on the Last Day, what will his state be when the balance-sheet of his deeds on the earth will be presented to God and He will pass His judgment? (These events should be visualized mentally as if one was actually going through them at that time) Afterwards, he should pray to God with urgent solicitation for forgiveness, for death in a state of faith and for mercy in the life beyond.

9 In worship, in *Zikr*, and in all other acts of virtue, the eye should be solely on Divine approbation and recompense, in the earning of which full trust should be reposed. This, in religious terminology, is called, *Iman-o-Ehtisab* (i.e., Faith and Expectation). Two *Rakats* of *Namaz* offered up in this spirit are more precious than a hundred without it. With this as the permanent attitude of the mind, even the minutest trifles of life like eating and drinking and the carrying out of the every day social and family obligations, get elevated to an act of prayer.

10 The making of solemn entreaties to God for one's spiritual as well as legitimate worldly needs and aspirations is not only an effective means to their realization but also a high act of worship by itself. A Tradition reads, "Dua<sup>10</sup>" is the essence and marrow of worship. <sup>11</sup>" And another: "Upon whom the doors of Dua have opened, upon him the doors of mercy have opened.<sup>12</sup>" A votary should make it a point to supplicate to God with special care and ardency after each *Namaz* and at other suitable times believing in it to be a most efficacious means of earning Divine pleasure and gaining access unto Him. Among the innumerable bounties conferred upon the holy Prophet by God, a most exclusive was the endowment of his prayers with unique depth and fervour. Hundreds of his prayers are preserved in the books of Traditions and they are imbued with an extraordinary effulgence and auspiciousness. These prayers have been assembled together by the scholars to make a separate volume. The volumes compiled by Mulla Ali Qari, called *AI-Hlzbul Azam*, and by Hazrat Thanvi, under the title of *Munajat-i-Maqbool*, have the special advantage of containing the Urdu translation of the prayers and can be obtained easily. Both of them have been divided into seven sections to provide one section for each day of the week. A section from one of these volumes may be read every day.

These ten suggestions will, *Insha Allah*, suffice for the seekers of religious and spiritual correction and reform, subject, of course, to the condition that they are acted upon diligently and honestly. But there are people who are temperamentally incapable of being profited by the mere reading of a book. For them the advice, again, is to give themselves the benefit of the company of a living guide.

1. Noah
2. Makateeb-e-Rasheedia, No. 81
3. During the last three or four years, particularly, the work of the rectification and renovation of Tasawwuf that has been done in India has completely separated the false from the true. The volumes of letters left behind by Hazrat Mujadid Alf-Sam and his renowned son and successor. Khwaja Mohammad Masoom, and the writings of Shah Waliullah and Kazi Sanaullah Panipati and the biography and sayings of Syed Ahmad Shaheed compiled by Shah Ismail Shaheed under the title of Sirat-i-Mustaqeem, and then, in our own times, the writing of Maulana Gangohl and Maulana Thanvi have brought the whole subject of Tasawwuf under such a glaring light and illuminated every nook and corner of it so thoroughly that to be misled in its path now can only be described as a calamity and a misfortune.
4. Meaning 'Path' or 'Way'-Translator
5. Meaning 'Spiritual guide',-Translator
6. According to Shah Waliullah this is the popular and compulsory form of Ehsan from which no section of the Ummat is exempt including the peasants and artisans. Some masters have given it the title of 'Popular Reform'.
7. Bukhari
8. Musnad-i-Ahmad
9. Repeating the names, attributes and praises of God.-Translator
10. Meaning supplication (to God).-Translator
11. Tirmtzi
12. Tirmizi