

# Qur'anic Sufism

## The Sunnah - The Soul of Sufism

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In Islam, the term 'mysticism' is synonymous with: *Ihsan* (Embellishment of conduct), *Qurb* (approaching God), *Tariqat* (road, i.e., the journey unto God), *Suluk* (journey, ie. unto God), *Tasawwuf* (etymologically means: to don woolen cloth.) This last term, oddly enough is most commonly used.

Sufism or Tasawwuf is variously defined. But whatever the variations in definition, its essential role, as recognized on all hands, is to set in motion a process of spiritual culture operating, in one form or another, for spiritual tranquility. The mystic tendency in human nature which Tasawwuf treats of has been characteristic of serious minds in all ages and among every section of humanity. The experience in individual cases has varied, both in scope and intensity, according to the vision caught of the Ground of things in life. Indeed long before the advent of Islam, it had been subjected to a searching analysis particularly in societies given to metaphysical speculation such as the Greeks and the ancient Indo-Aryans, and reduced to a system of spiritual training.

Mysticism as practised by the followers of Islam has had a chequered history. In its earliest manifestation, it meant nothing but living from moment to moment, so to say, in the eyes of God, implicitly following the lines of thought and conduct as the Prophet had laid both for himself and his followers. The primary aim was to transform every spiritual flight in the realm of self-perfection into an urge for the spiritual perfection of human society at large. But as Islam expanded into a widening political power, drawing into its fold people born to other modes of life and thought, the mystic tendency among Muslims underwent a kaleidoscopic change. The change was marked by the rise of a bewildering variety of mystic schools influenced chiefly by the Neo-Platonism of Alexandria, and the Vedantism of India, promoting in the mystic mind the mood for self-negation. A feeling of alarm was therefore felt in serious minds. As a way out, attempts were made at important stages in the history of Sufism to reconcile the early approach to the new forces at work, But the purists among the Sufis, have struggled hard to keep to the

original way of thought and living. It is the ideology of these and their practices which form the subject of a monograph published under the title of "The Qur'anic Sufism." It is this original way of thought and living which is given an apt descriptive name of "Qur'anic Sufism".

The work is intended to present what the author, Dr. Mir Vali-ud-din, believes to be the contribution of the Qur'an to Mysticism, and has therefore a value to all seekers of knowledge on that subject. [This was a Foreword by Syed Abdul Latif]

Dr. Mir Vali-ud-din, who died in 1975, has also produced another book under the title of "Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism." In this book he makes an important contribution to the study of methodology, techniques and special features of Sufi practices which are used in their systems of contemplative discipline. This aspect of Sufism has received little attention in the past. The official Orientalist, unaware for the most part of the techniques and methods of Sufism, have been in no position to make a meaningful study of spiritual techniques the like of which were lost in the West a long time ago and only now are being avidly sought after in the Eastern Traditions. As for the occultists and pseudo-spiritualists, whose number increases every day with the weakening of the spiritual forces in the West, they have spoken of spiritual techniques and in fact have of late invaded the field of Sufism after adulterating for some time Hinduism and Buddhism. But because they are not traditional and orthodox in the true sense of these words -- and have no respect for the Sacred Law or Shari'ah, which alone can make possible even the first step upon the Path -- they speak in a vacuum. They offer techniques of meditation and contemplation which at best may be of only minor harm and at worst can lead men into madness and demonic states of consciousness. In her Preface to this book, Dr. Annemarie Schimmel states that this book deserves a special welcome in that it is devoted to Sufi disciplines from the point of view of Sufism itself and presented by one who has spent a lifetime in their study and practice, one who is immersed in these disciplines himself.

She also refers to the fact that the number of people in the West who are seriously interested in the problems of Sufism has increased considerably during the last decades. The material that has been assembled here in *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism* by Dr. Vali-ud-din has never before been offered to the large audience of Western readers, and it is to be hoped that it will stimulate a deeper interest in the practices of classical Sufism and also incite scholars to enter more deeply into the field of scholarly study of mystical techniques and their influence on the human mind.

In his Preface to this book, *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*, Sayyid Hossein Nasr has this to say: "The great virtue of this book is in fact to start by ascertaining categorically the Quranic origin of Sufism. To have shown that the practice of Sufism is essentially the emulation of the life and practice of the Holy Prophet and its goal the true knowledge or *ma'rifa* of the message of the Holy Qur'an that can be summarized in the majestic quintessence of all metaphysics, namely, *La ilaha ill Allah* is already to have rendered a great service to the cause of Islam and to Sufism. For this affirmation will at least keep away the would-be pretender who, not being serious enough to accept the discipline implied in the *Shari'ah* of Islam, wishes to practise Sufism as an extraneous element that has been grafted on to the body of Islam and has somehow survived to modern times just awaiting occultists who, thinking that they know Sufism better than the Sufis themselves, can plunder its riches."

The book, *The Qur'anic Sufism*, describes in detail what the Qur'anic Sufism is all about and how it is distinguishable from the heterodox *Islamic Mysticism*. But, in order to get a general idea, let us study a few excerpts from this book. In order to explain as to what is meant by the 'Qur'anic Sufism', Dr. Vali-ud-din quotes Imam Ghazzali, who states in his book *'Al-Munqidh min-al-Dalal (Rescuer from Error)'*:

"When after acquiring proficiency in these Sciences, [traditional sciences] I turned my attention to the methods of the Sufis, I came to know that their method attains perfection by means of theory and practice. The gist of their knowledge is to mortify the self and acquire freedom from baser passions and evil attributes so that the heart may get rid of the thought of any thing save God and to embellish it with Divine remembrance."

"It is clear then that according to these great Sufis, Sufism is nothing but the purification of the senses and the will. It is the effacement of one's desires in the will of God. It is the building up of a solid wall between the pure self and the Gog and Magog of passions and desires. It is, in a word self-discipline - the avoidance of what is

forbidden and the performance of what is ordained. Alkalabadhi thus sums up their "doctrine of the duties imposed by God on adults": The Sufis "are agreed that all the ordinances imposed by God on His servants in His Holy Book and all the duties laid down by the Prophet (in the Traditions) are a necessary obligation and a binding imposition for adults of mature intelligence; that they may not be abandoned or forsaken in any way by the man, whether he be a veracious believer (Siddiq), or a saint or a gnostic, even though he may have attained the furthest rank, the highest degree, the noblest station, or the most exalted stage. They hold that there is no station in which a man may dispense with the prescriptions of the religious law, by holding permissible what God has prohibited, or making illegal what God has declared legal, or legal what God has pronounced illegal. . ."

In this sense Sufism is a purely Islamic discipline which builds up the character and inner life of the Muslims by imposing certain ordinances and duties, obligations and impositions which may not be abandoned in any-way by any man. The Prophet Muhammad was sent to: "instruct" mankind "in Scripture and Wisdom and to sanctify them." The Sufis keep these "instructions" before their eyes, strive their utmost to perform what has been prescribed for them to do and to discharge what they have been called upon to do. God says, "*And those who fight strenuously for us We will surely guide them into Our way,*" and again, "*Oh ye who believe ! Do your duty to God, seek the means of approach unto Him and strive with might and main in His cause: that ye may prosper.*"

It is this **real** Islamic Mysticism, this Qur'anic Sufism which is described Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah in his *Introduction to Islam*, paragraph 205, as the essence of mysticism in the following words: - "[ It is ] through mysticism, [that] 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 [i.e. improvement] of personal conduct, and the accomplishment of duties imposed by Islam."

Mohammad Mlam Ali Adam, the eminent translator of *Miftah-ul-Jannah ("The Key to Paradise")* gives the following description/definition of Sufism: "Tasawwuf (Sufism) is a lifelong discipline committed to purifying the heart from all spiritual vices and investing it with corresponding virtues while all the time *following closely in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad*, upon whom be blessings and peace of Allah in deed [and in] contemplation."

It is therefore clear from what the great scholars of

Sufism have said that the Tradition or the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, p.b.u.h. is the second source of the law of Islam. It is also the second source of the Qur'anic Sufism (the *real* Islamic mysticism).

We would like to give an excerpt from the English translation of *Miftah-ul-Jannah* ("The Key to Paradise"), which is a great work of a very learned scholar of Islamic sciences who was also a very well known and highly ranked Sufi Shaikh of very recent times. His name is al-Allama al-Jalil as-Sayyid Ahmad Mash-hur bin Taha al-Haddad al-Alawi al-Husayni al-Hadhrami, may Allah raise his *darajat* (spiritual rank). He left this world for the eternal abode of the Hereafter in the month of *Rajab*, 1417 A.H./1996 C.E. The *Hawl* to commemorate the anniversary of his death is being held tomorrow (Sunday, 8<sup>th</sup> November 1998/18 Rajab 1419 after Asr at 3:30 p.m. in the Imdadul Islam Mosque in Toronto On behalf of the organizers Br. Sayyid Ally Qullatin and Br. Siddiq Noormuhammad I invite you all to attend and participate in sharing the *Barakah*. We are fortunate that there are some devoted disciples of his living right here in Toronto as well as in other parts of Canada, East Africa, and other parts of the world. We are grateful for receiving this excellent book from one of his dear ones.

Here are the excerpts from Chapter 20, "The *Sunnah* is the Second Source of Law". These excerpts set out very nicely and with particular loving care a good number of Qur'anic verses and Traditions/Hadiths for ease of authoritative reference. Here are the excerpts: -

"In addition to knowing that the *Sunnah* is the corpus of the sayings of the Messenger of Allah, may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him as well as upon his kinsmen, and that it is also the corpus of his actions and his approvals, you should also know that it derives from unrecited revelation as Allah, the Exalted, says: "Nor does he (the Prophet) say (aught) of his own desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him (Najm 3 - 5). And Allah, the exalted, also said: "For Allah has sent down to you the Book and Wisdom and taught you what you knew not (before): and great is the Grace of Allah unto you" (Nisa 113). And the Book is the Qur'an and the Wisdom is the *Sunnah* which Allah has sent down via revelation and inspiration [respectively]. .

"The *Sunnah* constitute[s] an exposition and commentary on the Qur'an. Says Allah, the Exalted: "And we have sent down unto you (also) the Message that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may give thought (Nahl 44). And the Prophet, may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him and his kinsman, accordingly explained and detailed and

clarified in words and actions and approval what was revealed in the Book in general terms, like for example the number of Raka's in prescribed prayers, their appointed times, their stipulations their *Sunnah*; the appointed portions on what Zakat is due, and also issues concerning Fasting and rituals in Pilgrimage and 'Umrah. These include the pillars of these devotions, their stipulations, what corrupts them, etc. As is the case with *Sunnah*, in that it has come up with judgements for which there is no exhaustive provision under the headings of transactions - *mu'amalas* - and also under ethics and morals and merits for actions of virtue. The import of all this is that such guidance as the *Sunnah* offers organizes a whole range of affairs of life and it all derives from the Prophet upon whom be blessings and peace of Allah, and we have accordingly been commanded to abide by them as Allah, the Exalted, says: "*Ye have indeed in the Apostle of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day*" (Ahzab 21) and says Allah, the Exalted: "*Say: If you do love Allah, follow me: Allah will love you*" (Ali-i-Imran 31) And the Greatest Beloved of Allah, may the peace of Allah be upon him and his kinsmen, such a one himself becomes the beloved of Allah by virtue of his loving the Most Beloved of Allah . . .

And says Allah, the Exalted: "*So obey Allah and obey His Apostle: but if you turn back, the duty of Our Apostle is but to proclaim (the Message) clearly and openly.*" (Al-Taghabun 12). And says Allah, the Exalted: "*He who obeys the Apostle, obeys Allah*" (an-Nisa 80). And says the Exalted: "*So take what the Apostle assigns to you, and deny yourselves what he withholds from you*" (al-Hashr 7). The overriding consideration is the universal application of the verse and not the specific circumstance of the verse itself.

The rule implicit in the judgment has general application and extends to all ordinances and prohibitions as is the case with other verses and the many Traditions. Among them is the statement of the Prophet, may the blessings and peace of Allah be upon him and his kinsmen, in which he says: "The whole of my Umma will enter Paradise except he who refuses." "And who refuses, O Messenger of Allah?" someone asked. He said: "Who obeys me will enter Paradise and who disobeys me has refused." And says the Exalted: "*But no, by thy Lord, they can have no real Faith, until they make you judge in all disputes between them, and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions, but accept them with fullest conviction*" (an-Nisaa 65) And says the Exalted: "*Then let those beware who withstand the apostle's order, lest some trial befall them, or a*

*grievous Penalty be inflicted upon them."* (An-Nur 63)

Verily Allah, the Exalted, has ordered in His Book the adherence to the *Sunnah* of his Apostle as a matter of both bounden duty and obligation so much so that Faith itself is invalid without following him. And the rejection of compliance with the *Sunnah* is an act of unbelief because it is the rejection of what the Qur'an enjoins.

And for this reason, Muslims have taken special care from the times of the Companions to our own times; they recorded the *Sunnah* as pointed out earlier; they transmitted it verbally and in writing and researched it in a most thorough manner, preserved it accurately, rigorously examined and edited it. And in the circumstances none will desecrate the *Sunnah* and distance himself from it except one who entertains a weak faith in the *Sunnah's* persona, one who is totally removed from the community of Muslims in their path and creed, one who is in fact ignorant of Islam or one who is manifestly hostile to it."

Now, you are likely to ask if this is what the *real* Sufism is, then how is it different from what the west understands Islamic Mysticism/Sufism to be. Or you might put it another way by enquiring as to what are the external influences that seem to have adulterated the Quranic Sufism. To briefly answer this question, we would like to refer you back to the book '*Quranic Sufism*' and refer again to Junayd's remark about Sufism which was quoted by Dr. Vali-ud-din as: "Our system of doctrine is firmly bound up with the dogmas of Faith, the Qur'an and the Traditions *and that which is refuted by the Qur'an and the traditions is nothing but heresy!*"

There are two causes of heresy being mixed up with Sufism: 1) Peripateticism 2) Neo-Platonism

**1) Peripateticism** [following the techniques of Aristotle who had the habit of conversing with people while they walked and moved from place to place in the Lyceum]: -

After going through Aristotle and the works of other Greek Philosophers the later authors crammed Greek Logic and Philosophy in the orthodox Scholasticism (kalam) and instead of refuting those objections and doubts raised against Islamic doctrines by the opponents, themselves began to examine theological doctrines and busied themselves in judging them by the standard of theoretical reasoning. Difference of opinions is sure to arise among the devotees of 'pure reason,' that is why the history of philosophy is replete with contradictions and inconsistencies. Since the very beginning there were two parties among the Scholastics of Islam viz. the Ash'arites and the Mu'tazilites. The earlier Ash'arites made their reasoning subservient to

divine knowledge and during their times those dogmas alone were accepted which were supported by the Qur'an and the Traditions. Greek Philosophy and Logic did not find their way in them. But they laid special emphasis on the fact that the Mu'tazilites should be refuted, so that the common people may not fall a prey to their wiles. The Mu'tazilites made their doctrines totally subservient to theoretical reasoning. The result was "that thrown into the wide sea and utter freedom of Greek thought, their ideas expanded to the bursting-point and more even than a German metaphysician, they lost touch of the ground of ordinary life, with its reasonable probabilities, and were swinging loose on a Wild hunt after ultimate truth, wielding as their weapons definitions and Syllogism"

As regards the problem of the relation between the Creator and the Created, the Mu'tazilites denied the Omnipresence of God with the Created beings, because pure reason led them to believe that if the omnipresence of God be admitted with the Created beings, then by the divisibility of the created being it would necessarily follow that the Being of the Creator, too, is divisible. Further it would mean that God's Being is capable of incarnation and identification and this is clearly denying the transcendence of God. That is the reason why they interpreted in their own way all the Qur'anic verses in which encompassment, omnipresence, proximity and immanence are clearly described. By doing so they thought that encompassment etc. should be encompassment etc. in knowledge only. The late Ash'arites too with a view to making God's transcendence safe, made use of this sort of interpretation. But the truth is that in the Qur'an we find verses of transcendence and verses of immanence in abundance. To believe in one and reject the other is the way of those who deny God and His apostles, as indicated by the Qur'an. The great Sufis have diverted our attention towards this fact." After making these statements, Dr. Vali-ud-din makes it known in no uncertain terms that in his book the reader will find "the *true* creed of transcendence and immanence and unless the right creed is adopted the *true* understanding of the Qur'an and the Traditions is impossible.

## **(2) Neo-Platonism**

When Neo-Platonism found its way in Sufism, its first consequence was that the "Otherness" (Gairat) of objects was denied. The 'otherness' of the created things is clearly emphasized in the Qur'an. Under the influence of the teaching of Plotinus, phenomenal things were regarded not as other than God but identical with Him. God alone is, and other than God, in essence as well as in existence, is merely non-existent! "Everything is He"

(*Hama ost*) ! The necessary outcome of the negation of the 'essences' of things and 'otherness of things was heresy and *ibahat* ( i. e. regarding everything as permissible). There was now no further need of following the *Shari'at*

(The Law), the antithesis of the Law and the Path (*Tariqat*) was presented for the first time and thus a campaign was launched to throw off the yoke of the Islamic Code. Islamic Code was regarded as the creed of the imperfect, it was considered unnecessary for the Perfect to follow it; even the very conception of any other being save God was impossible. *Shari'at* is compulsory so far as one has to admit 'otherness' when 'otherness' has been got rid of and God alone remained, there is no need to follow *Shari'at*. "To follow beauty is the work of women and to follow majesty that of men". The Science of *Shari'at* is "book knowledge" (*Ilm-i-Safina*) but the Science of *Tariqat* is "heart knowledge" (*Ilm-i-Sina*) which is bequeathed from one mind to another since aeons, it is an arcane secret -- a veiled mystery.

Another consequence of Neo-Platonism was that the thing which was not the sole object began to be regarded as such and the real object was totally overlooked. Now higher achievements which are merely the necessary effects and are born by themselves began to be regarded as the sole object: ecstasy and 'states,' 'Clairvoyant illuminations' and 'Control' (tasarruf), 'miraculous powers' and 'true dreams' etc. were considered to be the sole end or aim of a *Salik* (the Traveller on the Path), and they were regarded as a characteristic symbol of holiness and piety. For the attainment of these feats unwarranted exercises and practices came in vogue, to learn and to be initiated in such sciences even the yogis and Sanyasis were not spared. Thus a hodgepodge of Indian rites. Greek theories and ideas took its birth which was known as Islamic Mysticism or Sufism The object underlying it was to possess extraordinary psychic powers and remarkable feats. The desire of attaining this supernatural power originated in the mind merely to show off one's superiority among people and to captivate their hearts. But as we have already shown in our discussion this afternoon, the *real* Sufism consists *in steering clear of lusts and sinful desires* and in realizing the Immediate Presence of God. It teaches us to be dead to self and attain everlasting life in God. We agree with Dr. Vali-ud-din when he says: "How on earth could it have any relation with the so called Islamic Mysticism which regarded such miracle mongering to be the sole aim and object of their followers !"

After dealing with such matters, the author makes it

clearly known to us that there is a vivid and lucid description of *real* Islamic Mysticism in his book, "the object of which is the attainment of "*abdiat*" and the upshot of which is the realization of the Immediate Presence of God. The source of this Sufism is the Holy Qur'an and the Traditions of the Holy prophet Muhammad. He maintains that it is probably for the first time that it is presented to us with such lucidity and logical sequence.

Let me conclude by quoting the definition of Sufism given by Abdul Razzaq-al-Qashani in his classical work, '*Istilahat-al-Sufiah*'. This book has been translated into English as '*A Glossary of Sufi Technical Terms*.' He says: "Sufism is the acquisition of the Divine Qualities." Therefore, as Dr. Hamidullah puts it in his book entitled '*Introduction to Islam*,' paragraphs 212 and 107, man thus tries to dye himself with the colour of God [see Qur'an 2:138] in order to see with His eyes, to speak with His tongue, to desire with his will [see Bukhari] seeking even to imitate Him according to one's humble human capacities.