

Introduction to Sufism

by DR. QADEER SHAH BAIG, R.A.

BISMI ALLAH-IR-RAHMAN-IR-RAHIM

The word Sufi is derived from the Arabic word '*suf*' which means 'wool' and which refers to the coarse woolen robes that were worn by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and by his close companions. The goal of a Sufi is none other than God Himself. There are signs of God everywhere in the universe and in man himself.

The origin and essence of man

Man is the mystery of God. For a mysterious purpose, man was outwardly created of clay and God breathed life into him, and all of the angels were commanded to prostrate themselves before him. As the Qur'an, which we believe is the highest form of revelation, declares:

"And remember when thy Lord said unto the angels: Lo I am creating a mortal out of potter's clay. So when I have made him and shaped him and have breathed into him of My Spirit, do ye fall down prostrating yourself unto him."

It is this Divine Spirit which is the essence of man. The body is merely the outward physical form which contains the Divine spark.

The body is made of the material elements fire, earth, air and water, and has five external senses -- sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch; and five internal faculties -- discursive thinking, imagination, doubting, memory and longing. All these powers, that is, both the external senses and the internal faculties, serve the heart. By the 'heart' we do not mean the physical organ which pumps the blood, and which is possessed by both man and animals. Rather by 'heart' we mean the Divine spark which distinguishes man from the animals. And unlike the physical heart which dies and decomposes with the rest of the physical body, the Divine spark or heart is indivisible and transcends death because its origin is in the spiritual world.

Man: the microcosm

The position of man in the universe is most important. Man is the microcosm, that is, a miniature universe. As such, he comprises in his outward or physical aspect all

the elements found in the universe. In his inner aspect, he contains the potential qualities of all creation from the lowest to the highest, that is, animal, satanic and angelic. He shares the qualities of lust and selfishness with the pigs; the qualities of jealousy and anger with the dogs; his cunning and deceit with Satan; his power and his spiritual light with the angels. But, what is more important, through love and devotion to God he can rise even higher than the angels, for he is the mystery of God before whom the angels were commanded to fall in prostration. He was given command over the whole universe.

The Qur'an declares:

"It is God who created the heavens and the earth and sent down out of heaven water, wherewith He brought forth fruits to be your sustenance, and He subjected to you the ships to run upon the sea at His commandment, and He subjected to you the rivers, and He subjected to you the sun and moon constant upon their courses, and He subjected to you the night and the day and gave you all you asked Him."

But although the universe was created for the service of man, man was created for the service of God *and for that purpose alone*. To the extent that he deviates from that purpose, he becomes unworthy of Divine guidance and favour. Consequently, he is left to his own devices with all his enormous powers, which, under the influence of his animal and satanic qualities, are capable of dragging him to the lowest of the low.

Purpose of life

Sufism helps man to be increasingly aware of his purpose of life -- namely, unfailing service to his Lord and Creator. It is a path travelled under the guidance of a Sufi master, who is able to deliver man from the narrow confines of the material world into the limitless reality of a spiritual life, wherein he can experience the Divine spark which eternally shines within him.

It is most important to understand that material man acquires his knowledge generally through the five external senses and five inner faculties of which we spoke earlier. The spiritual man, on the other hand, has, in

addition to these, a number of other means of acquiring knowledge, such as prophetic dreams and inspirations from beyond the material world. To the extent that a man adheres to the truth in his waking state, his dreams too disclose a similar degree of certainty. The Prophet (pbuh) expressed this in the saying: "The more truthful a man, the more prophetic his dreams."

Although knowledge through dreams comes in a state of sleep, insights through inspirations are gained in a state of wakefulness. The shaykh, or the Sufi teacher, interprets the dreams of a disciple, helps him to understand his inspirations, and resolves his doubts and uncertainties.

The spiritual mentor / shaykh

The disciple's need to have a shaykh is inevitable. If a man does not have a shaykh, Satan becomes his shaykh and lures him back into the temptation of his ego and finally destroys him in confusion and error. A disciple keeps unwavering faith in the words of his shaykh and receives infinite love and care from him. The relationship is strictly based on the pattern of the Prophet's (pbuh) relations with his companions which enjoyed Divine support. To quote the Qur'an:

"Now there has come to you a messenger from among yourselves. Grievous to him is your suffering, anxious is he over you, gentle to the believers, compassionate."

The Qur'anic roots of Sufism

Sufism really has its roots in the Qur'an itself and in the religious experience of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The preliminary signs of revelation were given to the Prophet (pbuh) in the form of visions and the Prophet (pbuh) deliberately sought solitude until the book of his heart, which was pure and unspoiled by schoolmen, was opened and the Divine Pen engraved upon it the revelation, the Qur'an.

The Sufi's knowledge of God comes from the Qur'an directly. And in spite of the Sufi's proximity to God, the undisputed basis of their direct experience of God has always been the Qur'an. The Qur'an contains instructions suitable to man with varying levels of spirituality. It satisfies those who are content with merely esoteric practices, but also contains the deepest and most profound esoteric meaning for those who desire a closer, more mystical relationship with God.

The Qur'anic verses which are the favourites of the

Sufis include:

"We [God] are closer to him [man] than his jugular vein."

"Say, surely we belong to God and to Him do we return."

"He is the First and the Last and the Manifest and the Hidden."

"God is the light of the heavens and the earth."

Such verses are limitless in their depth, scope and meaning, and man may draw from them as much mystical meaning as he has the capacity to understand.

God says in the Qur'an that God sent His Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) first and foremost as a Mercy unto all peoples. And men of different levels of spiritual understanding may avail themselves of this Mercy according to their various capacities.

The Prophet (pbuh) and his close associates never stopped at merely observing the minimum requirement in regard to prayer and devotional practices. All through his life, the Prophet (pbuh) kept long night vigils and practised voluntary fasts during most days. He never ate barley bread (the staple food of his day) on three consecutive days, and he never even touched a loaf of wheat bread--which was a luxury. One of his favourite sayings was "Poverty is my pride," and this saying came to be quoted in every manual of Sufi doctrine, making the rule of poverty a basic characteristic of Sufi life.

Significance of remembrance

The Sufis live with an ever increasing awareness of God. One aspect of this awareness is the practice of *zikr*. *Zikr* means 'remembering God,' usually by pronouncing His name or by uttering a number of recognized formulae. The Qur'an repeatedly admonishes believers to celebrate the praises of God and to do this often. For remembering the name of God brings satisfaction and comfort to man's heart. The following verse of the Qur'an reveals the significance of *zikr*:

"Recite that which has been revealed to you of the scripture, and observe prayer. For prayer restrains one from lewdness and iniquity, but remembrance of God is the greatest virtue."

In one passage of the Qur'an, the importance of *zikr* is

enhanced to such an extent that a response to it from God Himself is assured:

"Therefore remember Me, and I will remember you.

"The Qur'an warns those who neglect *zikr*:

"Whoso blinds himself to the remembrance of the All Merciful, to him we assign Satan for comrade and debar them from the way, and yet they think they are guided." Again, "Be not as those who forgot God, and so He caused them to forget their own souls. Those, they are ungodly."

The key to human happiness lies in the remembrance of God, as in the Qur'anic verse: *"Verily, in the remembrance of God do hearts find peace."*

Some orientalist who considered themselves experts on Islam invented the myth that the history of Sufism began with the appearance of certain introductory treatises on the Sufi tradition in the ninth and tenth centuries. In their assessment of the Sufi writings, they failed to give due consideration to the esoteric aspect of the Qur'an and the enormous literature on the sayings and deeds of the Prophet (pbuh), which has inspired the Sufis of all generations.

The history and methodology of Sufism

Sufism is an esoteric doctrine transmitted by word of mouth, and sometimes without even a spoken or written word, by an authorized teacher to a disciple, and from disciple to another disciple, in confidence. These secret instructions are acted upon by a disciple with perfect faith in the teacher. The disciple gives a report of his condition and experience in confidence to his teacher and receives another set of instructions most suitable to his state.

It is only the writings of the Sufi teachers, who speak from within the tradition, that allow an outsider a glimpse of the inner beauty of Sufism. One of the greatest scholars of all times was al-Ghazzali. He lived in the later eleventh and early twelfth centuries. He wrote his famous work *The Revival of the Sciences of Religion* in Arabic, with an abridged form *The Alchemy of Happiness* in Persian. These works were followed by the other writings and poetry by such Sufi teachers as Abdul-Karim al-Jili, Ibn Arabi, Suhrawardi, the famous Chishti saints, Hafiz, Sadi, Rumi and so many other Sufi poets.

At the same time there was an immense upsurge of open Sufi activity under the auspices of different Sufi

orders in all parts of the Islamic world. Each Sufi order constituted a focal point of activity, from which Sufi teachings were carried to the mass of the population by the representatives of the head of the order. The Sufi organizations constituted the social cement of the society in which they lived. Because of the strength of this social cement, Islamic civilization was able not only to withstand the many political upheavals of this period, but it also acted as a civilizing influence on the powers that were responsible for these upheavals.

Suluk: the spiritual journey

This brings us to say something about the Sufi discipline. The first and foremost requirement is the purification of the soul. The process is generally a long and difficult one. It consists of the three stages.

The carnal soul:

In the first stage, one struggles against the carnal soul or *nafs al-ammara* as it is called by the Sufis. *Nafs al-ammara* is the tendency in man to disobey God, and to take pleasure in evil deed and thought. This inclines man towards gossip, backbiting, vain talk, pride, selfishness, lust, hatred and jealousy. The struggle to overcome *nafs al-ammara* involves the purifying of the body, tongue, mind and heart.

- a) The body is purified by keeping it free from dirt, by preserving its members from harm and by not indulging in sexual license.
- b) The tongue must be purified by restraining it from backbiting, malicious gossip and vain talk, or from using it to alter the truth.
- c) The mind must be purified by abstaining from suspicion, plotting and thinking ill of others.
- d) The heart must be purified by keeping it free from lust, jealousy, greed, selfishness, hatred and pride.
- e) In this stage, a Sufi constantly examines the motives of his likes and dislikes.

The reproaching soul:

When he has subjugated the carnal soul, *nafs al-ammara*, the Sufi enters upon the second stage of purification in which he is able to respond readily to the

call of the reproaching soul which is called *nafs al-lawwama*. It is the *nafs al-lawwama* which reproaches man for his evil deeds and impels him to acts of mercy and generosity.

The contented soul:

After this stage has become firmly established in him, the Sufi enters the third stage which is known as the station of the contented soul, *nafs al-mutma'inna*. In this stage, the Sufi develops to the fullest the tendency to obey God and to act in perfect harmony with His commandments. Here the soul is reconciled with all other stations of the path, such as poverty, patience, gratitude and trust in God. Here the soul finds perfect satisfaction in being governed by the heart, the Divine spark in man. Here the Sufi becomes truly free from fear and grief. As God said in the Qur'an, "*Lo, indeed, the friends of God have no fear, nor are they grieved.*" Fear and grief are qualities of man, and friends of God are relieved of the burden of these qualities. Fearlessly, and with the strength of faith, they invite man to God, the source of man's creation and the goal of his life.

Here lies the difference between a true teacher and a false one: the true teacher invites man to God, and the pretender invites man to himself.

In this stage, a Sufi is filled with love, mercy, kindness, and a burning zeal to help others. In order to reach this high station, a Sufi must constantly strive to control his ego, to curb his anger and impatience. He must eat less, sleep less, talk less, and deny himself the pleasure of other people's company. Sometimes he withdraws completely from the worldly activities and occupies himself entirely with the remembrance of God and meditation.

As he makes progress spiritually, he is able to extend the length of his periods of seclusion, culminating in retreats of forty days' duration. In this seclusion, the Sufi fasts during the day, breaking his fast after sunset with only a small piece of bread and some water. During the nights, he keeps constant vigil and chants a selected verse from the Qur'an 125,000 times. The verse usually chanted is: "*There is no God but Thou, the Holy Lord. I am indeed one of the evil doers.*" Or, "*Say, He Allah is One. Allah is Sufficient unto Himself.*"

Meditation, ecstasy, states, stations and ascension

The various stages on the mystical path are known as *maqamat*, or the 'stations', which can be reached by any

Sufi by means of prayer, fasting, meditation, and the *hal* or 'mystical state', which may be vouchsafed to the Sufi by the Grace of God but is not attainable by the mystic's own efforts. A Sufi may be blessed by an experience which reveals to his soul the reality of the whole universe, from the lowest layer of earth to the highest heaven. This experience is called *mi'raj* or the 'ascension.' In this, a Sufi is generally accompanied by the spirit of his shaykh, and comes in contact with the spirits of other shaykhs and prophets. Various stations are also revealed to him with different colours and lights.

Extinction (*fana*) and subsistence (*baqa*):

One of the important phases of mystical experience which is attained by the Grace of God by a traveller on the mystical path is the state of *fana fi Allah*, 'extinction of the self in God', which is the transition to the state of *baqa billah* or the 'eternal life in union with God.' By passing away from self, the individual does not cease to exist, but is permitted to enjoy the supreme mystical experience in union with God. He is fully absorbed into the Love of God which gives him an everlasting awareness of the all-pervading presence of God.

This doctrine is further explained in an authentic tradition of the Prophet (pbuh) which states that God said:

Nothing is more pleasing to Me as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me than the worship I have made binding upon him. And My slave does not cease to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I Love him. And when I Love him, I am the Hearing wherewith he hears, and the Sight wherewith he sees, and the Hand wherewith he smites, and the Foot whereon he walks.

Most Sufis who have gone through this experience have preferred to live eternally in the greatest depth of silence which transcends all forms and sounds. Yet a few others have produced works of unsurpassed glory, especially in the fields of literature and music, which have crowned the culture of the entire Islamic world. Their works have inspired Sufis and non-Sufis for generations. As the great Persian Sufi poet, Hafiz of Shiraz, who is fondly remembered as the 'tongue of the unseen', said centuries ago for all times: "He whose heart is alive with love, never dies."

The pseudo-Sufis

Over the centuries, as the Sufi orders grew, the Sufi masters were generally recognized as sages and men of wisdom and grace, enjoying the esteem of the general populace.

The growing social prestige of the Sufis attracted self-seekers who posed as Sufis and dervishes and embarked upon the exploitation of the goodwill of the people. These pretenders indulged in superstitious practices, neglected moral order and religious ordinances, and boasted of their ignorance and lack of learning. In order to cover their own lack of discipline and dedication to the goal, some of these charlatans even tried to cut Sufism from its very roots--namely, the Qur'an and the practice of the Prophet (pbuh).

The acts of these pseudo-Sufis never altered the true course of Sufism. The heart of Sufism remained pure, well guarded by the traditional practice of the initiation of a seeker into a Sufi order by a Sufi master. The master's authority had properly been passed upon him by a previous master through the investiture of the traditional mantle of authority, symbolized by the presentation of a patched cloth. This initiation is supported by the tree of lineage going back through all the previous masters to the Prophet (pbuh) from whom the authority to instruct in the esoteric doctrine originated. Even today, this is the general practice of all the recognized Sufi orders.

It is Sufi masters such as *asad-Junayd*, *al-Ghazzali*, *Ibn Arabi*, *Shaykh Abdul-Karim al-Jili*, *Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti*, and *Jalaluddin Rumi*, among many others, who devoted their lives to spreading the light and grace among all men, irrespective of man's geographical, social, religious and racial origin. They left for all men a rich tradition of love and peace for all times. Even today, their example is a source of light and guidance to the seekers of truth everywhere. Indeed, only through total surrender to the Will of God can man hope to attain freedom and peace.