

TASAWWUF

(Islamic Mysticism)

THE FOUR STAGES OF TAZKIYA (Spiritual Development)

by SYED MUMTAZ ALI

By nature, man is innocent and inclined to right and predisposed to virtue. This is his true nature, just as the nature of a lamb is to be gentle and of a horse to be swift. But man is caught in the meshes and impediments of 1) selfish desires (*hijab al-nafs* = veils or psychic aspects of man's carnal self) 2) customs (*hijab-al-rusoom* = influence or influences of man's environment -- social, cultural, political, religious, etc.) 3) false teachings and superstition (*hijab-al-marifat*). This may make him 1) unclean; 2) desiring for what is false and forbidden; 3) deflected from the love of his fellow man; and 4) deflected from the pure worship of the one true God.

The path of Islam is simple and easy. It does not depend on complex or difficult-to-understand mysteries or self-mortifications, but on straight and goodly conduct in accordance with man's nature as implanted in him by God, as the Qur'anic verse 30, chapter 30, informs us:

"Therefore set right your face for the obedience of God, being one devoted to Him only: (establish) God's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind; no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by God: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not."

On the other hand, *spiritual perfection* may be most difficult, for it involves *complete surrender* on our part to God in all our 1) affairs, 2) thoughts and 3) desires.

Now, the problem before the spiritual teachers/murshids/shaykhs/sufi masters is to *cure* this crookedness arising out of the three hijabs/impediments referred to in the first paragraph, and restore human nature to what it should be under the Will of God.

The sufi teachers and spiritual adepts teach and train

their disciples how to prosper and succeed by following the prescriptions of *tazkiya*, *zikr* and *salat*.

A disciple (i.e., a salik, a 'seeker after God', the traveler on the spiritual path, the pilgrim) has to pass through certain 'stages' (*maqamat*) and experience certain 'states' (*ahwal*) in order to attain his ultimate end.

After cleansing the body, as laid down by the Shariah, (Islamic jurisprudence based on, and derived from, the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad's Traditions, i.e., records of his sayings, actions, and implied approval of things/acts) there appears to be *four* main stages:

1) First, 'Purification of the self' (*tazkiya-e-nafs*). This means cleansing the *sensual self* from its a) morally hateful, b) blameable c) animal propensities and embellishing it with laudable and angelic attributes or qualities. It is also known as the carnal or appetitive soul and is capable of purification.

It is also described as *nafs-e-ammara* or the tendency in man to disobey God. Nafs is also the seat of passion and lust.

2) Second, 'Cleansing of the heart' (*tazkiya-e-qalb*). This means *erasing* from the heart its a) love for the short-lived world and b) its worry over griefs and sorrows, and establishing in their place an ardent love (*ishq*) for God alone. Heart has the faculty of Divine knowledge/gnosis (*ma'rifat*).

3) Third, 'Emptying of the Sirr' (*takhliya-e-sirr*) from all thoughts that would divert attention from the remembrance of God. Sirr is an organ of mystical vision.

4) Fourth, 'Illumination of the spirit' (*tajliya-e-ruh*). This means filling the spirit with the effulgence of God and the

fervour of His Love. Ruh = Spirit is the place of Divine Love.

Passing through these disciplines, the sufis make spiritual progress and attain ma'rifat/gnosis and *Reality* is then revealed to them.

There appears some difference of approach among the various Orders of the sufis, but there is *none* in the spiritual concentration required. There may be *diversity* in dealing with the manifold *forms of manifestation*, but they are all one in the realization of the Reality behind them.

The 3 main sufi Orders

There are three main sufi orders: 1) the Qadiriyya Order, 2) the Naqshbandiyya Order and 3) the Chishtiyya Order. Details of other orders may be found in such classical reference books as *Kashf al-Mahjub* of Ali Hujwiri or *Ihya Ulum-id-Din* of Imam Ghazzali.

1. The Qadiriyya Order

a) The sufis of this Order *emphasize* 1) *the emptying of the 'sirr'* from all thoughts other than God and 2) the purification of self from all i) blameable ii) animal and iii) Satanic qualities.

b) They maintain that: a) human spirit has come from the 'World of Command' (*Alam-al-Amr*) and b) is capable of *reflecting the Divine effulgence*. But, due to impurities of 'self'/nafs, it does not do so. (For instance, when the mirror becomes rusty it cannot reflect any *form* placed in front of it, but, when the rust is removed, it begins to reflect clearly.

2. The Naqshbandiyya Order

a) The sufis of this Order lay much *emphasis on contemplation*.

b) They hold that the human spirit, as such, is devoid of all *forms*, but if you fill it with a form, it will have no room left for other forms.

c) Now, to attain *Reality*, one has to concentrate on *Reality*, uninfluenced by any aspect of the surrounding phenomenal world, and engage all the powers of thought, imagination and perception to accomplish this task.

d) That is why they consider *yad dasht* (constant remembrance) to be the most important *method* in *suluk*.

This method means 'concentration upon the *Divine presence* without the aid of words or ideas.'

3. The Chishtiyya Order

a) For the Chishti sufis, the most important requirement is the *love of God*.

b) This is how they explain it.

When a person falls in love with somebody, he keeps on thinking of his beloved *incessantly*, and at every moment, his longing grows more and more intense. Similar is the case of *real love* or the *love of God*.

c) To create this love, the sufis of this Order advise 'loud or vociferous' remembrance of God (*dhikr bil Jahr* = vociferous, loud, remembrance). It increases the heat of the heart and in turn *generates* love for God.

d) They also advise listening to Sama under strict conditions.

e) I agree with Dr. Mir Vali-ud-din, the author of a book entitled *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism*, that it is by *love* alone that the salik (disciple) attains to all the high stages of *suluk* (= the path to God), e.g., 1) self-effacement (= annihilation or Fana), 2) subsistence in God (*baqa*), and 3) the sense of the perpetual presence of God (*huzuri-e-qalb*).

f) It is love by which selfhood is naughted, human limitations are removed and direct observation of Reality is made possible. g) For detailed knowledge on this subject, I recommend Dr. Mir Vali-ud-din's *Contemplative Disciplines in Sufism* and *The Quranic Sufism*. Most of my talk today was based on some of the essential points culled from those books.