

## **Exploring Sufism**

By

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It is amazing how things come to us in this life. When I took my present position at the Memorial, I found a book on the desk in my office. It was *'The Sufis'* by Idries Shah. There was a note in the book to my predecessor offering the book as a gift and hoping that he would find it interesting. When I called my predecessor about the book, he told me that I could have it and that he was not interested in it. I believe the book was meant for me. I read and pondered this book for several months. It sparked my interest and I have collected a small library on Sufism.

I personally feel a connection and familiarity with the clarity, simplicity and beauty of the teachings of Sufism.

Sufism has been described, interpreted, and defined as many things. According to the Oveyssi School of Sufism, which dates to the time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (A.D. 570-632), it is generally accepted as the mystical dimension of Islam. In this school it is defined as the reality of religion. By this it is meant the experiencing of God in one's inner self, submitting to Him, and loving Him with one's mind, heart and soul. The founder of the Oveyssi School is Hazrat Oveys Gharani, whose way of inward cognition was approved by the Holy Prophet. This inspired and revealed spiritual knowledge has been passed down from father to son from *Hazrat Oveys Gharani* to the present Master *Molana Salaheddin A Nader Shah Angha*.

If we look at the Arabic original of the word *Sufim* (*Sufi*), we see that the term is problematic. Although it was widely used in several languages, it usually did not have the broad meaning that it has now acquired. Its current high profile owes itself mainly to the writings of western scholars. In the Islamic texts, there is no agreement as to what the word *Sufi* means. Those who used the word in a positive sense connected it with a broad range of ideas and concepts having to do with achieving human perfection by following the model of the prophet Muhammad. Those who used it in a negative sense

associated it with various distortions of Islamic teachings. Most Moslem authors take a more nuanced stand, neither accepting it whole heartedly nor condemning it.

In a broad sense, Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice. The derivation of the word has often been debated. Modern scholars have concluded that the most likely original meaning was "one who wears wool." It is said that by the eighth century (the second century of Islam) the term was sometime applied to people whose ascetic inclinations led them to wear coarse and uncomfortable woolen garments. Gradually it came to designate a group who differentiated themselves from other Muslims by stressing certain specific teachings and practices of the Qur'an and the Prophet.

In general, the *Sufis* have looked upon themselves as those Moslems who take seriously God's call to perceive His presence both in the world and the self. They stress inwardness over outwardness, contemplation over action, spiritual development over legalism, and cultivation of the soul over social interaction. On the theological level, *Sufis* speak of God's mercy, gentleness, and beauty far more than they discuss his wrath, severity and majesty.

For our purposes, it is enough to report that most of *Sufism's* own theoreticians have understood it to be the living spirit of the Islamic tradition.

Before proceeding further the term *Islam* should be defined. The Arabic term *Islam* was of relatively minor importance in classical theologies based on the Qur'an; it literally means submission to God, and it denotes the minimal external forms of compliance with religious duty.

According to early (10<sup>th</sup> & 11<sup>th</sup> Century) Muslim theologians, the key term of religious identity is not *Islam* but *imam*, or faith, and the one who possess it is the *mu'min* or believer.

Faith is one of the major topics of the Qur'an, mentioned hundreds of times in the sacred text. In comparison, *Islam* is a relatively uncommon term of secondary importance; it only occurs eight times in the Qur'an. Historically, the term *Islam* was introduced into European languages in the early nineteenth century by Orientalists like Edward Lane as an explicit analogy with the modern Christian concept of religion; in this respect, Islam was just as much a neologism<sup>1</sup> as the terms *Hinduism* and *Buddhism* were. Before that time Europeans used the term *Muhammadan* or *Mahometan* to refer to the followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

*Islam* or *Islamic* has come to mean an orientation in which the primary scriptural focus is the Qur'an and the leading personal model is the Prophet Muhammad.

Rather than *Islam*, the word which captures the essence of Sufism is *irifan*, derived from the word *ma'rifa* which means "knowing." In this context, it means knowing God and being replete with divine knowledge or mysteries.

The urge to know is inherent in each human being. The quest for the meaning of life, for self-knowledge, for eternity, is timeless. Those for whom the quest for the ultimate Reality is the most important goal in life, and those who do not give up their search until they discover the answer are generally regarded as "mystics."

Mysticism is associated with mystery and the unknown. Often, it is associated with secret rites and special ceremonies for the initiated. Mysticism is the belief that union and absorption into God is possible through self-renunciation, contemplation and mediation.

The mystical experience is considered to be one in which human reason has no part, being beyond human thinking or comprehension. In other words, it can only be known through personal experience. Therefore, the mind cannot grasp it and words cannot explain it. It is a mystery to those who have not had the experience. The mystical experience is usually associated with a sense of liberation,

<sup>1</sup> A word, usage, or expression that is often disapproved of because of its newness or barbarousness.

freedom, ecstasy, unity, contentment, abundance, compassion, knowledge, joy and love.

The seeker of God does not follow religion blindly, but searches for the truth within until the desired result is obtained.

Sufism teaches that all knowledge is humanity's legacy, but that one does not receive it until one truly seeks it. In Islam, the quest for one's truth is called *qiyam* (rising), and it is central to the believer's daily life.

This unflinching rising or unfaltering quest for truth is seen in the lives of the leaders of the various religious traditions.

*Buddha* gave up his throne and kingdom and did not stop until he attained enlightenment.

Despite the hardships *Moses* faced, he pursued his mission until he brought his people to the Promised Land.

*Jesus* withstood with strength and endured the pain and suffering inflicted upon him because of his unswerving love for the Father.

And Muhammad went on prolonged solitary meditation retreats until God spoke to him, and afterwards his life was devoted to proclaiming the message he received.

Sufism teaches that true communication about any experience, mystical or otherwise, must be based on shared inner experiences that are grounded in accurate cognition of our situation. Our experiences are a function of what it is we agree to pay attention to and with what faculties we attend, and how.

Sufism instructs humanity that "things are not as they seem," because we pay attention only to surface things with our senses and our scattered energy. Exchanging words is not the same as exchanging experiences. If you have never seen a sunrise, no words or pictures — however scientific, artistic, poetic or otherwise — tell you what it is or how it appears. Comparisons, analogies or metaphors can be made, but to know a sunrise, you simply must behold one yourself. Words do not convey the meaning.

Sufi adepts believe that because humanity fails to perceive its true situation in existence, it also fails to understand the true meaning of religion, which is to know the truth of existence. To understand the reality of religion is to know the truth of your constant Self and God. It is the sensory equipment with which we view the world which allows us to create a little God in our minds and which separates us from God, the reality of our Self, and the reality of our existence. Many people think they know God. We assume that there is a God who created us and then left us to ourselves. That is, He left us to our own limitations to continue the process of creation that He set in motion. When the Day of Judgment comes, we assume He will appear again to determine our fate and that we will either go to heaven or hell.

Many people think that hell is a place where there is fire and torment and that those who have been evil will burn in the fire. To many people Heaven is visualized as a splendid garden, where one's dreams and wishes will be realized. Sufism teaches that each person lives in the hell or heaven that he or she has created and will continue to do so after this life.

Muhammad said "*Whichever way you live here, that is how you will continue thereafter.*" The disquiet, the anger, the greed, the jealousies that people live with, that is their hell and that is how they will continue after their earthly life. Life on earth is a minuscule, and yet very important, part of the infinite life of each human being. It is minuscule when compared to the infinite, and it is important because all the tools needed for becoming infinite and eternal are provided in the human form. Death viewed with this in mind can be compared to leaving one room and entering another. Death does not mean that you cease to exist. All that ceases to exist is your current molecular form. The "I" behind the physical form, that entity that we refer to as the "self," will continue to exist.

When one discovers God, one finds heaven on earth. It is by knowing God that a life based on continuous changes and uncertainties is transformed into a life founded upon firm knowledge and stability.

The essential message of the Prophets, as stated in the words of the Prophet Muhammad, is, "*Die before you die.*" This means die from your human

self, lift the veil that covers your reality so that you may live in peace here and forever.

As with any spiritual study or school there are many aspects and branches of *Sufism*. Shaykah Fadhlalla Haeri is a writer-philosopher who was raised in a family of several generations of well-known spiritual leaders in the Holy City of Kerbala, in Iraq. He teaches that *Sufism* and *Islam* cannot be separated and that *Islam* is not a historical phenomenon that began 1,400 years ago. It is the timeless art of awakening by means of submission. *Sufism* is the heart of *Islam*. It is as ancient as the rise of human consciousness. He claims that the *Sufis* are the upholders of the real message of *Islam*. *Sufism* only arises when abuse of *Islam* is rampant. Otherwise, *Sufism* and real *Islam* are one and the same.

The key to *Sufism* is that of inner awakening, freedom and joy through recognition or outer restriction by choice and discrimination. The *Sufi* is the locus of connecting the outer, physical reality with a timeless, spaceless dimension which is experienced within the self. The *Sufi* lives like the tip of an iceberg which is apparent in the seen world, while experiencing aspects of the hidden and veiled world which is the foundation of what is visible, and which forms the rest of its reality. He does his best to understand the causal, physical outer life while awakening to an immense inner Reality.

Genuine *Sufis* are essentially similar wherever they come from, in that they share an inner light and awakening, and an outer courtesy and service to humanity.

Qushayri (d. 074) provides a list of sayings from different early Sufi masters that create different prescriptive ethical and spiritual goals for those who are attracted to this ideal.

*Sufism is entry into exemplary behavior and departure from unworthy behavior.*

*Sufism means that God makes you die to yourself and makes you live in him.*

*The Sufi is single in essence; nothing changes him, nor does he change anything.*

*The sign of the sincere Sufi is that he feels poor when he has wealth, is humble when he has power, and is hidden when he has fame.*

*Sufism means that you own nothing and are owned by nothing.*

*Sufism means entrusting the soul to God and most high for whatever he wishes.*

*Sufism means seizing spiritual realities and giving up on what creatures possess.*

*Sufism means kneeling at the door of the beloved, even if he turns you away.*

*Sufism is a state in which the conditions of humanity disappear.*

*Sufism is a blazing lightning bolt.*

Whatever its origin, the term *Sufism* has come to mean those, who are interested in inner knowledge, those who are interested in a way or practice toward inner awakening and enlightenment. The *Sufi* is one who persists in purity with Allah, and good character with creation.

The most famous Sufi is Mevlâna Jalâluddin Rumi (d.1273) a Persian mystic and poet. The Whirling Dervishes were founded by and follow his teachings. Rumi heard the sound of the goldsmith's hammer beating on the gold and in this sound he heard a cosmic music which caused him to begin to twirl and to merge into the cosmic twirling of creation.

I discovered his poems several years ago; at the time I thought they were concerned with physical love. Now I know they are written to and about God and Rumi's relationship with his creator. I think the best way to finish this brief introduction is to read a few selections from his works.

*Jewels of Remembrance*

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