

THE NOTION OF THE SOUL IN THE SUFI SPIRITUAL PATH

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ABSTRACT

Not all Muslims accept the fact that the spiritual path of Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is part of mainstream Islam. However, this article clearly affirms that Sufism is an integral part of Islam. The author draws repeatedly from the Qur'an to show that the spiritual path practiced by the great Sufi masters throughout Islamic history was inspired by revelation. The seven stages of the spiritual path are an expression of the transformation that takes place in the soul of spiritual wayfarers as they gradually leave behind all that may hinder them from reaching their destination. Each of these seven stages has its own characteristic aspects but the final goal of the Sufi path is to experience an intimate reunion with God Himself.

Keywords: Sufism (*tasawwuf*), soul, spirit, selfish desires, spiritual wayfarer, spiritual stage (*maqam*), Qur'an

INTRODUCTION

Islamic studies usually consists of Qur'an studies, Hadith studies, jurisprudence etc. However, Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is also an important aspect of Islam and which, in my view, is the real spirit of Islam. Unfortunately, Sufism has been presented in such a confusing manner that some Schools of Thought in Islam reject it completely while others, though they do not reject it outright, have separated it from mainstream Islam and consider it to be a wayward sect. But some Schools of Thought recognize the significance of Sufism and encourages its practice. In short, Sufism is a branch of Islam that has been seriously misunderstood and even vilified in the history of Islam.

The aim of Sufism is to educate Muslims, morally and spiritually so that they may become good human beings and productive members of society. In the literature on Sufism, the notion of the "Sufi path" refers to a process which seeks the complete reform of human beings by cultivating noble traits by means of which a spiritual wayfarer may reach increasingly higher levels of faith. This is the path that Sufi masters and their disciples have followed for many centuries.

The term *tasawwuf* (Sufism), began to be generally used some time after it had become part of the lifestyle of the Companions, Successors and Followers and all the subsequent sects of Islam. In other words, *tasawwuf* was an integral part of the early experience of Muslims. That is the reason why there was no need to coin a separate word such as *tasawwuf* during those early days. Whenever a person entered Islam during this early period, they would come with complete sincerity and dedication and their lives would be a perfect example of *tasawwuf*. During the time of the Companions, more or less everyone was a Sufi according to their way of life. That is why there was no need for a distinct term.

With the passage of time, however, Muslims began to adopt the bad practices of their social environment and Muslim society began to show signs of corruption. In response to the moral and spiritual decline of Muslim society, the term Sufi began to be used for those Muslims who resisted these evil influences and who remained steadfast in their original conviction. In other words, Sufis were those of upright character, who practiced generosity, who were hard working and regular in the observance of prayer. Such Muslims were called followers of Sufi practices (*ahl-tasawwuf*).

Those who reject the practices of Sufism claim that there is no evidence in the Qur'an or in the traditions of the Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him) that provides a basis for its authenticity. Although the present writer does not accept this line of argument, he will discuss the 'Sufi path in Islam' in the light of the Holy Qur'an and other traditional literature in Islam. Hence, the article aims to provide the reader with an understanding of the sources of the Sufi path of Islam and its significance for human spiritual development.

THE SPIRITUAL WAYFARER AND THE SUFI SPIRITUAL PATH

Sufism motivates Muslims to shun the sinful attributes of their personality and pursue the path of virtue in order to attain the state of righteousness. Such pursuit makes a person eligible to perceive the divine truth and to find the purpose of their existence in this world. The Qur'an instructs us how we should live. "Undoubtedly, Allah loves those who repent much, and He loves those who keep themselves thoroughly pure and clean".¹ The Word of God shows human beings what path they should take. "So, whoever hopes to meet his Lord should do good deeds, and must not associate any partner in the worship of his Lord,"² with a view to instilling a desire to purify themselves.

In Islam, the process of purifying one's soul is called the "Sufi path" or "spiritual journey" and the one who makes progress along this path is called a "*salik*" or a "spiritual wayfarer". By submitting to the discipline laid down in the Holy Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him), spiritual wayfarers experience various spiritual stages that gradually transform their lives.

When Shaykh Abu al-Hasan Nuri (may God have mercy on him) was asked about *tasawwuf*, he answered: "The abandonment of everything that pleases the soul is Sufism."³ In a similar vein, Shaykh al-Kattani (may God have mercy on him) described Sufism in the following words: "*Tasawwuf* is but 'good moral character', so whoever has a better moral character among you has entered more deeply into *tasawwuf*."⁴

Ali Hujwiri, known as Data Ganj Bakhsh (may God have mercy on him), defines the term *tasawwuf* in his book *Kashf al-Mahjub* by quoting Shaykh Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Muqri (may God have mercy on him) as follows: "Sufism is the maintenance of a right state (*maqam*) with God."⁵

In short, the relationship that spiritual wayfarers or seekers have with God bestows upon them the kind of joy and ecstasy described by the poet of the East, Muhammad Iqbal (may God have mercy on him) in the following words: "It makes the heart indifferent to both of the worlds. What a wonderful thing is this pleasure of acquaintance."⁶

THE SOUL AND ITS ATTRIBUTES

In Islam, the "soul" is an active element of the body rather than a static object of the psyche. The Arabic term used for "soul" is *nafs*, which some may translate as the "lower self" or "human nature". The other two important elements of a human being are the body and the spirit, which interact with the soul in its physical life. Accordingly, the spirit is associated with the "divine breath" as the Qur'an says: "Then

¹. *Sura al-Baqara*, 222. [All English translations of the Qur'an have been taken from *The Glorious Qur'an*, Shaykh-ul-Islam, Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri, London: Minhaj-ul-Qur'an Publications, 2009–2013.]

². *Sura al-Kahf*, 110.

³. Eissa, M. S. (ed.), (2007). *Al-Qushayri's Epistle on Sufism: Al-Risala Al-qushayriyya Fi'ilm Al-tasawwuf*, p. 46.

⁴. Ibid. p. 290.

⁵. Al-Hujwiri, A. B. U. (1976). *Kashf Al-Mahjub*, p. 41.

⁶. Muhammad Iqbal, *Kuliyat-i-Iqbal Urdu*, p. 429.

when I have perfected its (visible body) and blown into its (invisible) self My Own (illuminating) spirit, fall down prostrate before him (in his honour)".⁷ The "divine breath" enters the fetus of a human being when it is still in its mother's womb. The Qur'an further states: "And We are nearer to him than his jugular vein".⁸ This verse implies that the spirit is an agent of God through which God connects with His creatures. At another place in the Qur'an, the divine nature of the spirit is described in the following words: "And they (the disbelievers) ask you about the spirit. Say: 'The spirit is from my Lord's command'".⁹

The body is a combination of flesh and bones created biologically so that it can live in this world and the soul is like an operating system which comes under the sway either of the spirit or of the body during the life of a human being. The body is influenced by its surroundings by means of the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch, whereas the spirit is attentive to and is influenced by the divine Will. "We certainly guide them to Our ways"¹⁰ because "Allah takes to (the gnosis of) His Light whom He wills".¹¹

The Qur'an considers the spirit to be a positive influence in the life of a human being because it has been guided by God and, therefore, has acquired all its traits and attributes from the divine world. The spirit is, in fact, part of God's domain.¹² In contrast, the world is material in nature and hence can have a negative influence on a human being's life because it can urge the soul to satisfy its bodily desires without recognizing any limits. The Qur'an has described the negative impact of the world in the following way: "So let not the worldly life deceive you, nor let the Arch-Deceiver (Satan) deceive you concerning Allah";¹³ "And indeed, We have made whatever is on

earth a means of its beauty (and adornment)",¹⁴ "your riches and your children are nothing but a trial";¹⁵ "(Excessively) attractive has been made, for the people, the love of lusts (that) include women, children".¹⁶ The above Qur'anic verses do not mean to say that the world as such is evil but that the attractions of the world can deceive anyone who gets lost in its charms and is forgetful of their Lord. Both the body and the spirit strive hard to take control of the human soul and sincere followers of the spiritual path do not allow their passions to indulge excessively in earthly joys. In sum, the behaviour of a human being in this world is the result of whatever force controls his soul.

Whenever the soul is totally dominated by the body, it deviates from its original purpose and is reduced to the lowest form of the self, which consists of impulses and self-centered consciousness driving a person to satisfy the desires of the flesh or the ego. However, the Qur'an warns the believer against following such lowly desires in the following verse: "And do not follow your desire, for this (pursuance of desire) shall turn you away from the path of Allah".¹⁷

Since the lower form of the self can eventually dominate their sound reason and judgment, it is essential that spiritual wayfarers bring their evil desires under control and allow themselves to be transformed according to the ideals provided by the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him). The Sufi masters tell us never to blame ourselves because the human self is not evil as such.

⁷. *Sura Sad*, 72.

⁸. *Sura Qaf*, 16.

⁹. *Sura al-Isra*, 85.

¹⁰. *Sura al-Ankabut*.

¹¹. *Sura al-Nur*, 35.

¹². *Sura al-Isra*, 85.

¹³. *Sura Luqman*, 33.

¹⁴. *Sura al-Kahf*, 7.

¹⁵. *Sura al-Anfal*, 28.

¹⁶. *Sura al-Imran*, 14.

¹⁷. *Sura Sad*, 26.

Human beings become evil only when they allow the lower self to dominate them through selfish desires as the Qur'an asserts: "Certainly, the self commands much evil except the one on whom my Lord bestows mercy",¹⁸ and "Then he who transgressed the limits, and preferred the life of the world (to the Hereafter), Hell will truly be (his) abode".¹⁹

God Himself has called human beings to reform themselves and to follow the path which can take them towards the Lord, "Has the time not (yet) come for the believers that their hearts get humbled with tenderness for the remembrance of Allah?"²⁰ Upon receiving such a call from God, spiritual wayfarers ask the Lord to guide them to the

path that leads to Divine truth, "Show us the straight path".²¹ When the followers of the spiritual path are guided aright, they embark on the journey of spiritual transformation as required by the Qur'an. Such seekers strive in God's cause as they ought to strive²² and devote themselves to the Deity with full devotion.²³ Those who complete their journey on the spiritual path are given the good news that the Almighty is pleased with them because they are sincerely following the path of righteousness and virtue.

VARIOUS STAGES OF THE SUFI PATH

Sufi scholars of Islam have provided an exegesis of the Scriptural verse, "And the ranks (in paradise and hell) are allocated for all (separately) according to the (good and evil) deeds which they do".²⁴ The following could be named among such Sufi scholars of Islam: Imam al-Ghazali, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, Shaykh Abu Talib al-Makki, Shaykh Shahab al-Din Suhrawardi and Shaykh-ul-Islam Dr. Muhammad Tahir-ul-Qadri - a contemporary Sufi master. These scholars are all of the opinion that there are seven spiritual stages (*maqam*) on the Sufi path. A person needs to move through each of these seven stages in order to reach the experience of reunion with God. The next part of this article describes each of these seven spiritual stages in turn.

THE COMMANDING SELF (*nafs al ammara*)

The first and lowest stage that the soul can have is "the self that incites to evil". The Qur'an itself has provided the name for this state of the soul and defined its character in the following words: "Certainly, the self-commands much evil".²⁵ A human being existing at this level of the soul lives in constant restlessness, shows no sense of morality, is dominated by unbridled passions and often shows aggression towards others.

The *nafs al-ammara*, in its primitive state displays many evil characteristics such as wrath, greed, sensual appetite, arrogance, pride, hardness of heart, oppression of weaker creatures, lying, gossip, backbiting, jealousy, bitterness, envy, lack of contentment, constant complaining and delight in exposing the faults of others. In this state, a person shows no gratitude for the gift of life and rejects every advice and counsel. Such a person is dominated by selfish desires that lead to spiritual decadence.

THE SELF-REPROACHING SOUL (*nafs al lawwama*)

People who move beyond the first stage of spiritual development and are re-born spiritually into the next stage of the spiritual path experience the beginning of light shining within them. In this stage, they

¹⁸. Sura Yusuf, 53.

¹⁹. Sura al-Nazi'at, 37-39.

²⁰. Sura al-Hadid, 16.

²¹. Sura al-Fatiha, 5.

²². Sura al-Hajj, 78.

²³. Sura al-Muzzammil, 8.

²⁴. Sura al-Ahqaf, 19.

²⁵. Sura Yusuf, 53.

begin to recognize the negative effects of a habitually self-centered approach. The Qur'an gives this stage its name and describes its salient feature in the following verse: "I swear by the Day of Resurrection. And I swear by the blaming self, reproaching (itself for evil deeds)".²⁶ This stage represents the neutral situation in which human beings are born and from which they can either move upward to the third stage or fall backwards to the first stage of development. In the words of the Qur'an: "And by the human soul and by the One Who provided it with an all-dimensional poise, proportion and perfection, then He inspired it with (discrimination between) vice and virtue".²⁷ At this level, we become conscious of our own shortcomings and the consequences of our actions. Moreover, we learn to repent and to respond to impulses that take us to a higher level of humanity.

THE INSPIRED SELF (*nafs al mulhima*)

After passing through the second spiritual stage, a human being may enter the third stage of spiritual life, which is called the "inspired self". The mark of this stage or state is that the seeker begins to take genuine pleasure in prayers, meditation and other religious activities. Only now does the individual taste the joys of the kind of life prescribed by religion and obedience to God. At this stage, the seeker is also motivated by ideals such as compassion, service to humanity and high moral values. Hence, the person who reaches this stage may be considered a genuine beginner on the Sufi path. Prior to this stage, one may have attained a kind of superficial piety and performed worship in a rather routine way. The Qur'an describes this stage in the following words: "Well ! He whose breast Allah has opened for Islam is (stationed) in the light from his Lord".²⁸

THE CONTENTED SELF (*nafs al mutmainna*)

After reaching the third spiritual stage of development, spiritual wayfarers can now enter the fourth level in which they experience deep peace. Since former selfish desires and attachments no longer act as serious impediments, they can now begin to experience deeper contact with the Divine. The Almighty addresses the contented soul in these words: "O contented (pleased) self ! Return to your Lord in such a state that you are both the aspirant to, and the aspired of, His pleasure (i.e. you seek His pleasure and He seeks yours)".²⁹

On reaching this state of serenity, spiritual wayfarers begin their ascent to greater intimacy with God as they begin to experience deeper contentment and love for God. At this stage, progress on the spiritual path takes place through deep commitment and sincere fulfilment of the obligations prescribed in the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet (blessings and peace be upon him). Spiritual wayfarers are now able to fulfil their obligations towards the Creator and towards God's creation. They no longer yield to unlawful or reprehensible desires because their only desire is for whatever God has declared desirable.

THE PLEASED SELF (*nafs al radiya*)

Seekers on the spiritual path now move into the fifth level in which they experience the "pleased self". At this stage, wayfarers are not only content with their lot but are ready to embrace the difficulties and trials of life because they realize that these hardships can also lead to spiritual growth. Allah says to the pleased self, "Return to your Lord in such a state that you are both the aspirant to, and the aspired of, His pleasure".³⁰

²⁶. Sura al-Qiyama, 1-2.

²⁷. Sura al-Shams, 7-8.

²⁸. Sura al-Zumar, 22.

²⁹. Sura al-Fajr, 27-28.

³⁰. Sura al-Fajr, 27-28.

THE SELF WHO IS PLEASING TO GOD (*nafs al mardiya*)

Those who reach the sixth stage on the Sufi path realize that all power to act comes from God and that they can do nothing by themselves. They have no fear and have no need to ask for anything because they experience the reality of the Qur'an verse: "So whichever direction you turn to, there is the presence of Allah (i.e. the essence of Allah is radiantly manifest in all directions)".³¹ The spiritual wayfarer is not only deeply content with the Lord but the Lord is also content with the wayfarer. As the Qur'an says: "Allah is pleased with them and they are pleased with Him".³²

At this level of spiritual development, wayfarers are ready to bear all kinds of affliction and distress with patience because they know that the Lord is perfecting them through these trials. Their attitude towards the trials they suffer in this life is described in the Qur'an: "And We will most certainly test you somewhat by means of fear and hunger and certain loss of wealth and lives and fruits. And, (O Beloved,) give glad tidings to those who observe patience".³³

THE PURE SELF (*nafs al kamila*)

Those few wayfarers who reach the last and seventh stage of the spiritual life transcend the self entirely. When they arrive at this final stage, they hear these words of praise from their Lord, "Surely, that will be your reward and your hard work is acknowledged".³⁴ At this stage, even the pious desires of human beings and their search for further spiritual rewards are extinguished because they have reached the perfect spiritual state, which is to be reunited with God.

CHARACTERISTICS OF SUFIS

In his book *al-Luma'*, al-Sarraj al-Tūsī says that Sufis show distinctive features that make them different from other people. One example of such a distinctive feature is that Sufis perform their duties well and avoid every kind of action that is forbidden. Moreover, Sufis get rid of anything that could become an obstacle in their relationship with the Beloved, who is none other than Allah Himself. Among the many other characteristics evident in the lives of Sufis, the following could be given special mention: to live in poverty rather than to amass wealth; to consume only enough food for sustenance and even to be ready to endure hunger; to reject excessive clothing and other material possessions; to avoid pride, haughtiness and boastfulness; to show affection towards the young and respect for everyone else; to be ready for any sacrifice in the service of others; to be free of envy regarding the achievements of others; to foster virtues such as patience during times of trial; to correct one's own faults constantly; to suppress one's worldly desires (*nafs al-ammara*) and to accept the will of Allah in all things.³⁵

CONCLUSION

The Sufi spiritual path is a significant aspect of Islam that is based entirely on the two primary and transmitted sources (Qur'an and Sunnah). This spiritual path teaches people to lead a noble life in order to cultivate virtues such as truthfulness, straightforwardness, civility, honesty, gratitude and hard work and to avoid vices such as lying, backbiting, cheating, greed, sloth, anger and corruption. All these instructions are present in the Shari'ah of Islam. Having appropriated all of these basic

³¹. *Sura al-Baqara*, 115.

³². *Sura al-Bayyina*, 8.

³³. *Sura al-Baqara*, 155.

³⁴. *Sura al-Insan*, 22.

³⁵. Al-Sarraj al-Tusi Abu Nasr, *Kitab al-Luma'*, p. 29.

laws, however, Sufi aspirants seek to move further along the spiritual path. The higher levels of spirituality are attained only by following the Sufi path in the footsteps of the great Sufi masters in Islam. ■

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