

Foreword

The Key Features of Sufism in the Early Islamic Period

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A thorough-going examination of the particular characteristics of early Sufism would be a lengthy and time-consuming enterprise — far beyond the scope of a foreword. In what follows I propose to provide a general outline of the development of certain salient concepts in the history of early Sufism, touching on its high points in this period, points that for the most part have been lost today. From its very inception the school of Sufism in Islam was characterized by a stress on certain fundamental spiritual issues. These provide a key to its esoteric doctrines as they unraveled over the course of later centuries, and may be subsumed as follows:

1. THE PRACTICAL AND VISIONARY APPROACH TO THE 'UNITY OF BEING'

Masters of this early period concentrated on the visionary and practical, versus the purely speculative or theoretical, understanding of the notion of the 'Unity of Being'.¹

Visionary 'Unity of Being' implies heart-insight, a faculty of vision known only to 'possessors-of-heart', those Sufis who distance themselves from the realm of the ego and the temporal personality by means of divine love, and contemplate God through God's vi-

1. For further discussion of the significance of the 'Unity of Being' in Sufism, see Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, "Two Approaches to the Principle of the Unity of Being" in L. Lewisohn (ed.), *The Heritage of Sufism II*, pp. xv–xviii.

sion.

Theoretical 'Unity of Being', on the other hand, is a philosophy concocted by the ratiocinative reason (*'aql*), and as such, belongs to the realm of the ego. Belief in this philosophy is devoid of all spiritual benefit—in fact, it only serves to send a person socially and morally astray, since one may easily misuse this philosophy to justify indulgence in various vices or offensive behavior by claiming that “since all is Unity, anything goes.” Thus, reasonable adherence to this philosophy is suspect, because it actually may lead to moral decay, lowering an individual from the sublime station of humanity.

Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 672/1273) illustrates this danger in his story of the thief who enters an orchard and steals some apricots. The owner happens to come by at that moment and seizes him. “Are you not afraid of God?” he asks the thief. “Why should I be afraid?” replies the man. “This tree belongs to God, the apricots belong to God and I am God’s servant. God’s servant is but eating God’s property.” At this, the owner orders his servants to fetch a rope and tie the man to the tree. “Here is my answer,” explains the owner as he begins to beat the thief. In response, the thief exclaims, “Are you not afraid of God?” Smiling, the owner replies, “Why should I be afraid? This is God’s stick, the rope belongs to God and you are God’s servant. Thus, I am only beating God’s servant with God’s stick.”

In contrast to the theoretical approach to the Unity of Being, the visionary approach is founded on love and practised solely by those free of self-interest. This school fosters and emphasizes service to society, tolerance of and kindness to one’s fellow human beings, and produces such exemplars of human excellence as Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr (d. 440/1049), Abū’l-Ḥasan Kharāqānī (d. 426/1034), Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī (d. 260/874), Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj (d. 309/992) and Rūzbihān Baqlī (d. 606/1210).

Whereas theoretical Unity of Being is a matter of talk and conjecture, visionary Unity of Being involves a practical spiritual path in which the Sufi sees all things as one, for his eyes are focused in but one direction. The former is a doctrine taught and learned by the mind; the latter a practice based on direct experience and realization. The former is taught from the classroom’s lecture podium; the latter is gnosis gleaned in the school of revelation and vision. The former

increases one's intellectual awareness; the latter frees one from consciousness of self and brings one to life in God. So when Ḥallāj cried out, "I am the Truth!" he was a flute being played by God's breath. When Bāyazīd exclaimed, "Glory be to me!", it was God speaking through him.

2. DIVINE LOVE

As its basic assumption, Sufism teaches that Reality cannot be known by logical or rational methods. God must be approached through love, and only through divine grace and favour may intimacy with Him be attained. From the perspective of the Sufis, as long as 'you' remain 'yourself', you cannot know God: the greatest veil between you and Reality being 'yourself'. Only the fire of divine love can burn away this egocentricity. Moreover, such divine love appears spontaneously; it cannot be learned through study.

Divine love may arise in the Sufi in one of two ways: 1) through divine attraction (*jadhba*) and 2) through wayfaring and methodical progression on the Path (*sayr wa sulūk*). By 'attraction', God's love arises within the Sufi directly, without intermediary, so that the Sufi forgets everything but God. By the second route, that of wayfaring and methodical progression on the Path, the Sufi becomes devotedly in love with the spiritual master, who then transforms this love into divine love. To present another simile, the Sufi sets out in search of a spiritual master, holding in hand the lantern of the Search for Truth; then the master kindles the flame of his lamp with the breath of his own holy spirit, causing the Sufi to burn with divine love. Ḥāfiz (d. 791/1389) alludes to this in the following verse:

*In this intense heat which scorches our insane heart
The straw of one hundred dry intellects
would burn up in an instant.*

In this context, when Bāyazīd was asked the significance of Sufism, he replied, "It is as if someone had stumbled on a buried treasure in a corner of his heart, and in that treasure trove had uncovered a valuable jewel called 'love'. Only one who has found this treasure is a Sufi." In the same vein, Khwāja 'Abdullāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1089) remarked, "Most people say 'One', yet remain attached to a hundred thousand. When Sufis say 'One', however, they flee

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from their very identities.”² Or, in Abū’l-Ḥusayn Nūrī’s (d. 295/907) words:

Sufis are the wisest of all people. Most people look to God’s bounty, while Sufis look to Him alone, seeking His intimacy. Others are content with His gifts; the Sufis are content only with Him. This is not a task which they accomplished of their own freewill; rather they saw something, their eyes were drawn to it, and everything fell away from them, all their powers reverting to Him. All people pursued and contented themselves with the Qualities, in place of the divine One Qualified; the Sufis sought the Essence and beheld naught but It. The entire world denied the Sufis, the world’s wisest men most vehement in their denial of them—for the ignorant man is impotent and cannot reject anything; it is the ‘wise’ who reject.³

Thus for the Sufi masters, the consequence of divine love is that they become focused in one direction, concentrating on God alone. The following story is an excellent illustration of this attitude:

Sultan Maḥmūd of Ghazna visited the town of Kharaqān to pay his respects to the Sufi master Abū’l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī. He pitched his tent nearby and sent an emissary ahead to announce that the King had arrived after traveling a great distance to visit him, requesting that Kharaqānī leave his *Khānaqāh* and meet him in his tent. If Kharaqānī refused, the emissary was instructed to quote the following verse, “O ye who believe! Obey God, and obey the messenger and those of you who are in authority.”⁴ The emissary conveyed his message. When Kharaqānī tried to politely excuse himself, the emissary recited the Koranic verse as instructed.

The master replied, “Tell Maḥmūd that I still am so immersed in ‘Obey God’, that I am embarrassed to admit that I have not yet realized ‘Obey the messenger’, let alone, ‘those of you who are in authority’.”⁵

Rābi’a’s (d. ca. 180-5/788-92) account of how once she beheld the Prophet in a dream carries essentially the same message:

2. *Tabāqāt al-sufiyya*, ed. by Muḥammad Sarwar Mawlayī (Tehran: Sahāmi ‘ām 1362 A.Hsh./1983), p. 94.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 72. (On Nūrī, see the essay by Annemarie Schimmel in this volume.—ED.)

4. Koran IV: 59.

5. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’*, edited by Muḥammad Este’lami (Tehran: Zawwār 1365 A.Hsh., 3rd ed.), p. 668.

He asked me if I loved him. “Who doesn’t love you,” I told him, “but my heart is so totally transported with God’s love that no place for love or hate of another remains.”

Another version of this anecdote is given by the Arab author, Zabīdī (d. 602/1205) in the *Ithāf al-sādah al-muttaqīn*, who renders it in the following fashion:

Rābi‘a was asked, “How much do you cherish the Prophet of God?”

“Excessively... I love him indeed,” Rābi‘a avowed, “but the Love of the Creator inhibits me from love of His creatures.”⁶

3. THE CALL TO WORSHIP OF GOD

Masters of the Path call their disciples to God, not to themselves. Their aim is to liberate disciples both from self-worship and the worship of other individuals, and guide them toward worship of God alone, rather than attracting others to themselves for egotistic purposes or through the display of miracles and powers in order to eke out a living for themselves.

In this context, ‘Aṭṭār recounts the story of a man who went to Imam Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), challenging him to “Show me God.”

“Have you not heard what God said unto Moses, replied Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, that ‘You shall not see Me’?” [Koran VII: 146]

“Oh yeah, I’ve heard it,” said the man, “but now we live in the community of Muḥammad, where one man was known to exclaim, ‘My heart has seen my Lord’ and another cried out, ‘I do not worship a Lord I cannot see.’”

“Bind his limbs and throw him into the Tigris,” ordered Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq. He then commanded the water to carry him under. He sank and rose to the surface again.

“O son of the Prophet of God! Help! Help!” cried the man.

Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq commanded the water to drag him under again. The man then rose to the surface again, repeating his desperate plea for help. Again the master commanded the water to drag him under. Several times this was repeated. At last the man totally despaired of receiving assistance from any created being, and having

6. See Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women*, 2nd ed., trans. L. Lewisohn (London: KNP 1990), p. 47. For yet another version of this tale see ‘Aṭṭār, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

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abandoned hope in human succour he resorted to God, crying, “O Lord! Help! Help!”

“Now draw him forth from the Tigris,” commanded Ja‘far al-Şādiq.

They pulled him forth and left him on the shore to rest and recover. When he had recovered his wits, they asked him if he had, when drowning, seen God.

“As long as I relied on aught but God,” he related, “I remained veiled. But once I finally took refuge in Him, in my heart an orifice opened. Therein I gazed and saw the object of my quest. ‘Whenever you are rendered impotent, then supplicate’.”

So Ja‘far al-Şādiq commented, “Until you cried out ‘al-Şādiq!’ [‘the Truthful’] you were but a liar (*kādhīb*).”⁷

This idea of total detachment from all but God is similarly emphasized by ‘Aṭṭār in the following story concerning Dhū’l-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 246/860):

Dhū’l-Nūn relates as follows.

I was wandering in the mountains when I observed a party of afflicted folk gathered together.

“What befell you?” I asked.

“There is a devotee living in a cell here,” they answered. “Once every year he comes out and breathes on these people and they are all healed. Then he returns to his cell, and does not emerge again until the following year.”

I waited patiently until he came out. I beheld a man pale of cheek, wasted and with sunken eyes. The awe of him caused the mountain to tremble. He looked on the multitude with compassion. Then he raised his eyes to heaven, and breathed several times over the afflicted ones. All were healed.

As he was about to retire to his cell, I seized his skirt.

“For the love of God,” I cried. “You have healed their outward sickness; pray heal my inward sickness!”

Dhū’l-Nūn,” he said, gazing at me, “take your hand from me. The Friend is watching from the zenith of might and majesty. If He sees you clutching at another than Him, He will abandon you to that person, and that person to you, and you will perish at each other’s hands.”

So saying, he withdrew into his cell.⁸

7. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*’, p. 16.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 140. Adapted from A.J. Arberry’s *Muslim Saints and Mystics: Episodes from the Tadhkirat al-Auliya* (London: RKP 1966), pp. 93-4.

Again, expounding this same theme of the worship of God above and beyond any created intermediary, ‘Aṭṭār recounts the story of the son of a nobleman who one day stopped in at the assembly of Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr. Upon hearing the master speak, he was so smitten with remorse that he repented of his misguided life and pledged everything he owned to the master, who subjected him to several years of degrading labor. With the passing of time the man had become an object of contempt to the local folk. The master then instructed his own disciples to ignore him as well. Finally, he expelled the man entirely from his assembly of disciples and forbade him to return to his *Khānaqāh*.

Severed completely from any expectation of society, the disciple took refuge in a mosque, where he flung himself to the earth and cried, “O Lord! You see and you know that no one accepts me. I have no pain but pain for you, and no refuge but in you.” Weeping copiously for a period, suddenly he was vouchsafed the state and given the fortune which he had sought so long.

Back in the *Khānaqāh*, Abū Sa‘īd told his disciples to go with him to find the man he had expelled. They set out and soon found him, still weeping. When the disciple saw the master, he asked him why he had been subjected to such humiliations. Abū Sa‘īd replied, “Before, you had despaired of all created beings, that is true: but one veil yet remained between you and God—that veil was me. Now we have removed this too. Arise and rejoice.”⁹

Certain Sufi masters in fact were so rigorous in their emphasis on the call to the worship of God to exclusion of intermediaries, that they insisted that after death their graves remain concealed, thus preventing people from visiting their tombs and hence becoming distracted from God! Hence, we hear from ‘Aṭṭār that “Dāwūd Ṭā’ī instructed his disciples, ‘Bury me behind a wall, so that no one will pass before my face.’ This they did, and so it remains unto today.”¹⁰

9. *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’*, p. 807.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 207.

4. ENGAGEMENT IN A PROFESSION, SHUNNING SLOTH AND UNEMPLOYMENT

The great mystics and masters of the Sufi Path endorsed the necessity of having employment, and themselves engaged in various trades, encouraging their disciples to emulate in deed their industrious example. For example, Sarī Saqaṭī (d. 255/871) was a wholesale merchant in the bazaar, Abū'l-Qāsim Junayd (d. 295/910) ran a glass-cutter's shop and Qushayrī (d. 465/1072) relates of Abū'l-Ḥusayn Nūrī:

Every morning he would set out from his house for his shop, and pick up a few loaves of bread on the way. These he gave away as alms, then went on to the mosque where he performed his prayers until the hour of noon prayers. He would then go and open his shop while still fasting. His fellow merchants supposed he had eaten at home, while his household assumed he ate in the bazaar. For twenty years during his initial years on the Path, he maintained this practice.¹¹

Ibn Khafif tells us that “In my day most masters had a profession whereby they earned their living. I myself learned spinning through which trade I managed to support myself.”¹²

5. SERVICE TO PEOPLE AND LOVE FOR HUMANITY

The classical Sufi masters essentially strove to foster an attitude of mutual fellowship and service to humanity and to promote the development of positive human qualities among their brethren, and through their own example set themselves to uphold this ideal. Thus Anṣārī recounts:

When Abū 'Abdullāh Sālīmī was asked what the friends of God are known for, he replied, “Subtlety of expression, pleasant dispositions, cheerful countenances, generosity of nature, tolerance, forgiveness of those who beg their pardon, and kindness—

11. Qushayrī, *Tarjuma-yi Risāla-yi Qushayriyya*, Persian trans. Abū 'Alī Ḥasan ibn Aḥmad al-'Uthmānī, ed. B.Z. Furūzānfar (Tehran 1321 A.Hsh./1942), p. 55.

12. Abū'l-Ḥasan Daylamī, *Sirat-i Shaykh-i kabīr Abū 'Abdullāh Ibn Khafīf Shīrāzī*, translated into Persian by Rukn al-Dīn Yahyā ibn Junayd Shīrāzī, edited by Anne-marie Schimmel (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Bānk 1363 A.Hsh./1984), p. 24.

regardless of others' virtue or iniquity — towards all beings."¹³

This sentiment of altruistic love is likewise reflected in Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī's remark:

If only I could die for all mankind so that they would not have to endure death! If only I could atone for all mankind's sins, so that on the Day of Judgement they would not be called to reckoning. If only I could endure the torments of the life hereafter instead of people, that they be saved from the Inferno.¹⁴

The words of Sari Saqaṭī strike the same note:

"I would that all the sorrow and grief which burdens the hearts of others descend upon my heart, that they be delivered from grief."¹⁵

Sari also recounted,

It was the feast-day. I saw Ma'rūf Karkhī collecting date-stones. I asked him the purpose of his occupation.

"I saw a child crying," he said. "I asked him why he was crying. The boy said: 'I am an orphan, deprived of mother and father. Today, on the feast-day, other children are given new clothes. Not me. Other children get marbles to play with, but not me'.

"So I am collecting these date-stones to sell," said Ma'rūf, "to buy him marbles to play with, that he weep no more."¹⁶

In the same vein, Ibn Munawwar tells us that one day Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī'l-Khayr reflected to himself,

I had realized both knowledge (*'ilm*), spiritual practice (*'amal*), and meditation (*murāqaba*). I needed to experience being deprived of these things. When I pondered how to achieve such a thing, I realized that the inner reality of this could be found in nothing else except service to the Sufis. So I waited on the Sufis, making it my personal task to clean out their chambers and scrub their lavatories. After doing this assiduously for a time, I became accustomed to it and realized its inner significance. Then I took up begging, becoming a professional mendicant in order to fill the Sufis' coffers. There came a day, however, that alms were not

13. Anṣārī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, p. 312.

14. 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, p. 678.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 331.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

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forthcoming. So I sold my turban, then my shoes and finally, the embroidered lining on my robe for the Sufis. My father chanced to see me bareheaded in my threadbare robe:

“Son!” he said, distressed, “What do you call this?”

I replied, “They call it ‘look at it but don’t ask about it’.”¹⁷

It is said that, when asked how many ways there are from creation to God, Abū Sa‘īd replied, “According to one account, there are a thousand ways, according to another, there are as many as there are particles in existence, but the shortest, the best, and the easiest way to God is to bring comfort to someone else.”¹⁸

It is in the same context that Rūmī writes:

*For God’s pleasure should you do your service;
What care have you whether you bear peoples’
praise or censure?*¹⁹

Or, in Sa‘dī’s words:

*Service to people is the whole of worship:
The worship of God is not done
by rosary beads, robes of piety or prayer carpets.*

Sahl al-Tustarī related,

“I was once traveling with Ibrāhīm ibn Adham, when I fell ill. Whatever he owned he sold in order to cover my expenses. I asked him a favor. He even sold his own donkey to fulfil it. When I recovered, I asked what had become of his donkey. He said he had sold it.

“What then will I ride on?” I asked.

“O brother,” he replied, “mount up on my shoulders.”

So he carried me on his back for three leagues.²⁰

Likewise, ‘Aṭṭār recounts how three men once prayed together in a ruined mosque. When they fell asleep, Ibrāhīm ibn Adham stood by the door until the morning. In the morning the devotees

17. *Asrār al-tawhīd fī maqāmat al-Shaykh Abū Sa‘īd*, ed. Dhahībullah Ṣafā (Tehran: Sipīhr 1354 A.Hsh./1975, 3rd ed.), p. 34.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

19. *Mathnawī-yi ma‘nawī*, ed. R.A. Nicholson, Gibb Memorial [New] Series n.s. 4 (London: Luzac 1925-40), Bk. VI: 845.

20. Qushayrī, *Tarjuma-yi Risāla-yi Qushayrī*, p. 26.

asked him why he had done this. “It was bitterly cold weather,” he explained, “with a freezing wind. So I made myself into a door, that you would suffer less, and the hardship be my portion.”²¹

6. NOT TAKING OFFENCE AT MALTREATMENT

*We'll keep the faith, endure blame and rejoice,
For on this path it's infidelity to take offence.*

Ḥāfiz

For the Sufis, not taking offence has two aspects:

First of all, being offended is an attribute of self-existence and egocentricity, whereas the Sufi is ‘non-existent’ and ego-less. Thus one who becomes piqued and takes offence is still a ‘somebody’, conscious of his separate self-identity as distinct from God—a person who associates others with God, rather than a Unitarian.

Second, the Sufi is one who has submitted to God and is content with God’s will. Whatever affliction befalls him, or whatever harassment he receives, he considers it sent by God. As the poet says:

*Since grief and dolor have come from the Friend,
I delight in this pain; this suffering
is the cause of my awakening.*

Not taking offence at maltreatment is the touchstone, the criterion which distinguishes the Sufi from the non-mystic: thus the more profound one’s equanimity when receiving rough treatment, the more selfless, the more ‘Sufi’ one actually is. The following tales concerning some of the early classical Sufi masters: Ibn Khafif, Abū’l-Ḥasan Būsanjī, Abū ‘Uthmān Ḥīrī²² and Bayazīd Bisṭāmī provide ample illustration of this principle:

A traveller once visited Shaykh Ibn Khafif, robed in a black dervish cassock and with a black turban on his head. The Shaykh, noting his strange attire, was inwardly overcome by zealous indignation. Having performed two *rak'ats* of prayer, the visitor

21. ‘Attār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*, p. 114.

22. On Ḥīrī, see Sara Sviri’s essay in this volume. —ED.

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conveyed his salutations to the Shaykh.

“Brother, what means your black vesture?” demanded the Shaykh.

“These clothes attest to the death of my gods,” said the guest (he meant his ‘lower soul’ [*nafs*] and desire). “Have you not heard the verse: ‘Have you ever considered what kind of person it is who makes a deity of his own desires?’ [Koran XXV: 43]”

“Throw this man out!” cried the Shaykh. Ibn Khafif’s disciples dragged the man outside in disgrace.

“Now bring him back inside,” the master commanded. Forty times he was similarly expelled from and summoned into the assembly. At last the master rose and kissed the brow of his black-robed guest and offered his apologies, saying,

“Indeed, it befits you to wear black, for you withstood forty rounds of disgraceful treatment without becoming once discomposed.”²³

* * *

Ibn Khafif received a traveller suffering from diarrhoea. The Shaykh remained sleepless, at the guest’s bedside the entire night, emptying his bedpan. He didn’t catch a wink of sleep that night. At dawn the sick guest cried out, “God damn you! Where are you?”

The master leapt up, fearful of the man’s condition, and approached him with his bedpan.

Later in the morning his disciples approached him. “What sort of guest is this,” they protested, “who uses such abusive language? We have had enough of his obscenity! Our patience is exhausted!”

Ibn Khafif said, “Oh — all I heard him say was, ‘God bless you’.”²⁴

* * *

Once Abū’l-Ḥasan Būshanjī was travelling in full Sufi regalia. A Turk passed by and punched him. The crowd accosted the Turk and demanded an explanation for his disrespectful behavior.

“Are you not aware who it is you struck? That is Abū’l-Ḥasan Būshanjī, the master of this age?” they said.

Smitten with remorse, the Turk returned and begged the Shaykh’s apologies. Abū’l-Ḥasan dismissed him, “Begone my friend! Forget this matter! I do not regard you as the Agent of this act anyway. The place where it was coming from is never involved in error.”²⁵

23. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*’, p. 576.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 577.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 522.

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“For forty years,” said Abū ‘Uthmān Ḥirī, “whatever state God has kept me in I have not resented and to whatever state He has transferred me I have not been angry.”

The following story bears out this assertion. A man who disbelieved in Abū ‘Uthmān sent him an invitation. Abū ‘Uthmān accepted, and got as far as the door of his house. The man then shouted at him.

“Glutton, go home! There is nothing here for you.”

Abū ‘Uthmān went home. He had gone only a little way when the man called out to him.

“Shaykh, come here!”

Abū ‘Uthmān returned.

“You are very eager to eat,” the man taunted him. “There is still less. Be off with you!”

The Shaykh departed. The man summoned him again, and he went back.

“Eat stones, or go home!”

Abū ‘Uthmān went off once more. Thirty times the man summoned him and drove him away. Thirty times the Shaykh came and went, without showing the least discomposure. Then the man fell at his feet in tears and repented, becoming his disciple.

“What a man you are!” he exclaimed. “Thirty times I drove you off in shame, and you showed not the slightest discomposure.”

“That is easy.” Abū ‘Uthmān replied. “Dogs do the same. When you drive them away they go, and when you call them they come, without showing any discomposure. Something at which dogs equal us cannot really be counted anything important. Men’s work is something else.”²⁶

* * *

“Bāyazīd often wandered about amongst the tombs. One night he was returning from the cemetery when a young nobleman approached playing a lute. “God save us,” Bāyazīd exclaimed. The youth lifted the lute and dashed it against Bāyazīd’s head, breaking both his head and the lute.

Bāyazīd returned to his convent and waited till morning. Then he summoned one of his companions. He wrapped the sum of the price of the lute in a cloth, added a piece of sweetmeat, and sent these to the youth.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 477. Adapted with minor changes from Arberry’s translation, *Memoirs of the Saints*, pp. 234-35.

“Tell the young gentleman,” he said to his companion, “that Bāyazīd asks his pardon. Say to him, ‘Last night you struck me with that lute and it broke. Accept this money in compensation, and buy another. The sweetmeat is to remove from your heart the sorrow over the lute’s being broken.’”

When the young nobleman realized what he had done, he came to Bāyazīd and apologized. He fell at the Shaykh’s feet and repented.”²⁷

Ibn Khafif recounts the following anecdote about Abū ‘Alī Rudbarī’s (d. 323/934) remarkable forbearance under harassment:

One day a reception to entertain all the Sufi Shaykhs in Mecca was held, wherein all of them were present. Among them was a dervish from Khurāsān unknown to Abū ‘Alī. When the dinner-cloth was laid out, Abū ‘Alī arose, and as was the custom of the Sufis, took a pitcher of water and passed among the guests, serving each of the eminent masters, joking and exchanging pleasantries with all of them. Just as he behaved with cheer and conviviality with the masters, so he approached the stranger, when, to the astonishment of the gathered guests, the dervish snatched the pitcher from him and smashed it over his head, breaking his head and drawing blood. The disciples of Abū ‘Alī rose to strike the dervish.

Abū Ali said, “Allah! Allah! Do not hurt him. Do not ruffle his temper.”

At this, the dervish was disconcerted and abashed at his own behavior.

Seeing the dervish had been put to shame, Abū Ali said, “O brother! Forget it! I was feeling quite feverish and wished to draw off a little blood to relieve this bad fever until you struck me. Now, without recourse to bloodletting or getting myself a cupping-glass, I have gotten rid of the fever altogether, for a good amount of blood has been let out already!”

So saying, he continued his light-hearted repartee with the dervish, putting him in a good humor, until the dervish had forgotten his sense of shame and had regained his former cheer and joviality.²⁸

Bāyazīd’s forbearance in face of affliction is the subject of Sa‘dī’s famous verses in the *Būstān*:

27. *Ibid.*, p. 171. Adopted with minor changes from Arberry’s translation, *Memoirs of the Saints*, p. 117.

28. Abū’l-Ḥasan Daylamī, *Strat-i Shaykh...Ibn Khafif Shirāzī*, p. 63.



A bowl of ashes is poured over the head of Bāyazīd Bistāmī as he emerges from the baths. From the *Būstān* of Sa'di; Mughal period, ca. 1039/1629. British Library, MS. Add. 27262, folio 67v.

*I've heard that once, before dawn, on a feast-day,
From a bathhouse there emerged Bāyazīd;
All unaware, a pan of ashes
Was poured from a mansion down onto his head,
At which he said, turban and hair dishevelled,
And rubbing his palms in gratitude upon his face:
'My soul! I'm fit for the Fire –
Shall I, then, look askance at ashes?'*²⁹

7. SPIRITUAL CHIVALRY

Spiritual chivalry³⁰ has a very special significance for the Sufis. They understand it to mean the performance of altruistic service to others while remaining free of any self-consciousness with respect to the value of that service. Many Sufi masters have spoken about such chivalry.

Abū Ḥafṣ Ḥaddād has said, “Chivalry means being fair to others, while not expecting fairness in return.”³¹

Junayd remarked, “Chivalry occurs without any awareness of the act of being chivalrous. One who performs such an act never says, ‘I did this’.”³²

When Kharaqānī was asked about chivalry, he replied, “Were God to bestow a thousand bounties upon your brother and only one upon you, you would nevertheless give that one bounty to your brother as well.”³³

8. RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

The classical Sufi masters extended their respect to the followers of all other religions, rejecting sectarian infighting, fanaticism, bigotry and the persecution of others in the name of religion.

In this respect, Kharaqānī reflected, “I do not reckon anyone to

29. Translation by G.M. Wickens: *Morals Pointed and Tales Adorned: The Būstān of Sa'di* (Leiden: E.J. Brill 1974), p. 123.

30. See the essay by M.J. Mahjub in this volume.—Ed.

31. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, p. 394.

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl-i Shaykh Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī wa muntakhab-i Nūr al-'ulūm*, ed. Muḥtabā Minuwī, (Tehran: Ṭahūri 1359 A.Hsh./1980), p. 92.

be spiritually realized if he still permits his heart to discriminate in thought between so-called 'gospel truth' (*ḥaqq*) and 'credal error' (*bāṭil*)." Maghribī (d. 810/1408) later expressed this idea in verse:

*An eye which sees the Truth
For lies has no sight at all:
For all 'untruth' that is conceived
Or what is perceived as lies, mendacity
Lies in the eyes, themselves deceived,
The viewpoint of men without veracity.*³⁴

The following story also illustrates the attitude of religious tolerance maintained by the classical Persian Sufis:

Once a group of Sufis set out to visit Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī. Among them was a Christian posing as a Sufi. When they reached Kharaqān, Abū'l-Ḥasan rose and insisted on serving them individually with his own hands. He was especially kind and considerate towards the Christian. One day he suggested that his guests go to the public baths. While his other guests were delighted at this idea, the Christian became apprehensive: What would he do with his cincture?³⁵ While he was preoccupied with this thought, Abū'l-Ḥasan summoned him aside and whispered in his ear, "While you bathe, you may leave your cincture with us: my servants can be trusted to keep your secret, I assure you."

When he returned from the bath, the master pulled him aside in confidence and quietly gave him back his cincture.

* * *

'Abdullāh ibn Ṭāhir Azdī said, "I had a dispute with a Jew in the bazaar and in the heat of our debate, called him a dog.

"At that moment Ḥusayn ibn Manṣūr [Ḥallāj] passed by and overhearing me, looked at me in rage and said, 'Stop *your own dog* from barking!' He passed on in fury.

"When I had freed myself from this disputation, I sought out Ḥallāj. He turned away and refused to face me when he saw me. I begged his forgiveness until I regained his goodwill."³⁶

34. *Diwān-i Muḥammad Shīrīn Maghribī*, edited by Leonard Lewisohn (Tehran: McGill Institute of Islamic Studies 1993), ghazal 35. Trans. L. Lewisohn.

35. A belt worn by religious minorities in Islamic countries; in this case, hidden under the Christian's outer garments.

9. INDEPENDENCE, CHARITY AND DETACHMENT FROM THE WORLD

Among the distinctive qualities exhibited by Sufi masters, especially those of the early period, one should also include: independence (*istighnā*), charity (*iṭhār*) and detachment from worldly interests and concerns. Selflessly committed to the service of others, these Sufi masters possessed nothing and generously gave away to other Sufis and to the poor whatever came to them, showing no concern for the possession of financial means, estates or landed properties.

Even if a Sufi lacked adequate means, he would not hesitate to sacrifice robe and turban to relieve another's material hardship. From the depths of personal material deprivation they thus realized the meaning of spiritual 'needlessness' — indicating the spiritual station of 'independence' by their severance of all ties with temporal being and their utter unworldliness and lack of selfishness.

The classical masters detached their hearts from everything but the Absolute Truth and, just as dispassionate detachment (*tajrīd*) characterized their outward relations to society, so in their inner life they were completely unaffected by illusions of phenomenal being. Standing on the threshold of Absolute Being they knocked on the door of Non-Existence, beholding Being in non-being.

10. KINDNESS TO ANIMALS

Beholding all beings as creatures of God, the classical Sufi Shaykhs likewise extended their affection and compassion to animals. 'Aṭṭār relates that

Ma'rūf Karkhī had an uncle who was mayor of the city. One day, he was passing by some wasteland when he observed Ma'rūf sitting there eating bread. Before him was a dog, and Ma'rūf was putting one morsel in his own mouth and then one in the dog's.

"Arc you not ashamed to eat with a dog?" cried his uncle.

"It is out of shame that I am giving bread to him," replied Ma'rūf.³⁷

36. Mujtabā Minuwī, *Āzādī wa āzād-fikrī*, p. 124.

37. 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, p. 326. Arberry, trans., *Muslim Saints and Mystics*, p. 164.

In the following story related by ‘Aṭṭār the special relationship of Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj to dogs³⁸ is represented:

One day, Shaykh ‘Abdullāh Turughbādī, of the city of Tūs, had spread his tablecloth and was breaking bread with his disciples, when Maṣṣūr Ḥallāj arrived from the city of Qashmir, dressed in a black *qabā’*, and holding two black dogs on a leash. The Shaykh said to his disciples: “A young man arrayed in this way is going to come; get up all of you, and go out to him, for he does great things.”

And they went out to this man and brought him back with them. The Shaykh, as soon as he saw him, yielded his place to him; [Ḥallāj] took it, brought his dogs to the table close to him... The Shaykh looked at him. He ate bread, and gave some to his dogs, which shocked the disciples. Only when he was leaving did the Shaykh get up to say good-bye to him.

Upon the Shaykh’s return, his disciples said to him: “Why do you let such a man who eats with his dogs sit in your place, a passerby whose presence here renders our entire meal impure?” “These dogs, responded the Shaykh, were his self (*naḥs*); they stayed outside him, and walked behind him, while our dogs remain inside ourselves, and we follow behind them... This is the difference between the one who follows his dogs and the one whom his dogs follow. His dogs are outside, and you can see them; yours are hidden. His state is a thousand times superior to yours. He desires to be in the creative will of God, whether there be a dog there or not, he wants to direct his act toward God.”³⁹

* * *

On the way back from Mecca, relates ‘Aṭṭār,

Bāyazīd stopped off in Hamadān, where he bought some saffron seeds. He put these into the pockets of his cassock and brought them back to Bisṭām. On his return, he emptied out his pockets, and found therein an ant. “I have displaced the poor creature from his native habitat,” he reflected. So he rose and returned to Hamadān with the ant and deposited it in the same place he had bought the seeds.

38. For a detailed exposition of this theme, see Javad Nurbakhsh, *Dogs From a Sufi Point of View*, (London: KNP 1989).

39. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’*, p. 556. The following version of this famous story is taken from Herbert Mason’s translation of Massignon’s version of ‘Aṭṭār (based on that of Nicholson and Pavet de Courteille); see *The Passion of al-Ḥallāj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam* (Princeton University Press 1982), I, p. 182.—ED.

None shall attain such a degree in ‘the realm of compassion to created beings’ until he has realized to its farthest extent the station of giving ‘reverence to God’s command’.⁴⁰

11. ACCENTUATION OF THE INTERIOR DIMENSION OF THE *SHARI’Ā* OVER THE EXTERIOR

Through both oral discourse and poetic and prose composition the classical Sufi masters attempted—whether by direct statement or symbolic allusion—to enlighten their audiences concerning the transformatory *Reality* of the *Shari’a*. Their sayings and writings must be viewed as a kind of passage from the outer kernel of formal liturgics found in the Islamic religious Law, to the inner core of truth-worship therein. Although the vast number of sayings dedicated to this theme of ‘transcending the fetishes of religious formalism’ can hardly be covered in this brief discussion, the selections provided below suffice to illustrate the profundity of their views:

Pilgrimage (*hajj*)

Regarding the rite of Pilgrimage in Islam (the visit made, at least once in a lifetime, by Muslims to the Ka‘ba in Mecca), the classical masters attempted to direct attention away from idolatrous concentration on the ‘House of the Lord’ – the Ka‘ba in Mecca – to the ‘Lord of the House’. In this respect, Muḥammad ibn Faḍl Balkhī remarked, “It amazes me that these people take the trouble to traverse deserts to reach God’s House and see the relics of His Prophet, yet do not attempt to suppress their own passions and sensual desires (*nafs wa ḥawā*) so as to reach the heart and contemplate God’s Signs therein.”⁴¹

Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr used to direct all his disciples who wished to make the Pilgrimage to visit the grave of his master, Abu Faḍl, instead, telling them to circumambulate his tombstone until their goal was attained.”⁴²

40. ‘Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā*, p. 164.

41. *Tarjama-yi Risāla-yi Qushayriyya*, p. 57

42. *Asrār al-tawḥīd*, p. 61.

Once Kharaqānī asked a man where he was going and the man replied, “To the Ḥijāz on pilgrimage.”

“Why?” Kharaqānī asked.

“I go there to seek God.”

The master retorted, “Where then is the God of Khurāsān, that you must journey to the Ḥijāz?”⁴³

Once Shiblī was seen running with a burning brand in hand. Asked his destination, he replied, “To the Ka‘ba, to set it afire, so people, instead of worshipping the House of God, make the *God of the House* the focus of their devotion.”⁴⁴

It is reported that, while performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, Rābi‘a remarked, “Here is the House (Ka‘ba) which is idolized upon the earth, whereas God neither enters it nor leaves it.”⁴⁵

Abū’l-Ḥasan Kharaqānī said, “I abstained from all but God. Then, when I summoned my self, heard God reply instead. I realized that I had transcended created being. So I cried out, ‘O God, here I am! O God, at Your service!’⁴⁶ I made my ablutions, donned the pilgrim’s garments and performed the rites of pilgrimage by circumambulating God’s Unity. The Ka‘ba then circumambulated me, hymning my praises, while the angels extolled and lauded me.”⁴⁷

Kharaqānī also said, “Some people circumambulate the Ka‘ba, some the Sacred Mosque in the heavens, and some the Divine Throne, but the companions of chivalry (*jawānmardān*) circumambulate God’s Unity.”⁴⁸

Once Kharaqānī even remarked to Abū Sa‘īd ibn Abī’l-Khayr, “May they keep you from going to Mecca, for you are too precious to go there. May they bring the Ka‘ba to you, to circumambulate you!”⁴⁹

This interiorized vision of pilgrimage animated and inspired much later Persian Sufi poetry. Thus the poet Kamāl Khujandī (d.

43. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl Kharaqānī*, p. 81.

44. ‘Attār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā’*, p. 617.

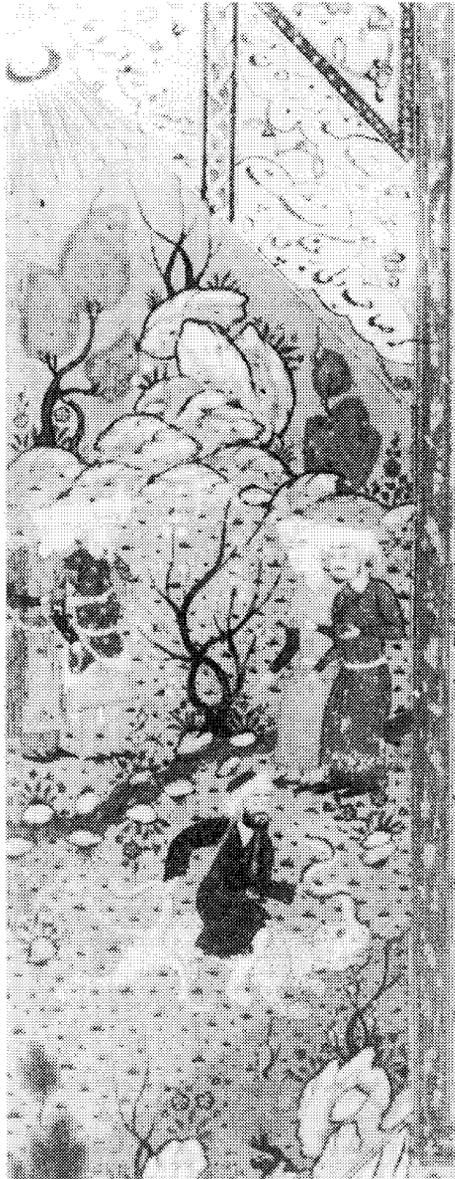
45. Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, *Sufi Women*, p. 58.

46. An invocation uttered by pilgrims to Mecca.

47. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl Kharaqānī*, p. 50.

48. *Ibid.*, p. 65.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 19.



Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharāqānī holding a snake in each hand while riding a panther. From the *Kulliyāt* of Sa'dī. Shiraz, Safavid period, 974/1566. Add. 24944 folio 9a. (Courtesy of the British Library).

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803/1400) wrote:

*The 'Arafāt of lovers is at the head of the Beloved's lane;
It would be shameful for me to leave this door
to circle the Ka'ba.*⁵⁰

Heaven and Hell

Abū'l-Ḥasan Kharaqāni said, "I'm not telling you that heaven and hell do not exist, but I do say neither heaven or hell have any place around me, for they are both created things and in my sphere and place, no place exists for any temporal created being."⁵¹

Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī'l-Khayr said, "Wherever the delusion of your ego appears, that is hell. Wherever you are not, that is heaven."⁵²

The Koran

Kharaqāni said, "I have seen people who devote themselves to exegesis and interpretation of the Koran; the companions of chivalry devote themselves to self-exegesis."⁵³

Asceticism (*zuhd*)

Aḥmad Ḥarb sent Bāyazīd a prayer rug with the message: "Spread this under your feet when you pray at night." Bāyazīd sent it back to him.

"Send me a pillow stuffed with the asceticism of both this world and the next, that I may place it under my head and sleep soundly," he demanded.⁵⁴

Supplication (*dū'ā*)

"Pray for me," someone entreated Mimshād Dinawari.

"Go, seek the quarter of God, that you be independent of

50. *Diwān-i Kamāl al-Din Mas'ūd Khujandī*, ed. K. Shīdfar (Moscow 1975), Ghazal 440, p. 464.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 47.

52. *Asrār al-tawḥīd*, p. 299.

53. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl-i Kharaqāni*, p. 91.

54. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl-i Kharaqāni*, p. 127.

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Mimshād's supplication," replied the Shaykh.

"Where is God's quarter?" queried the man.

"Wherever 'you' are naught," he replied.⁵⁵

'Abdullāh Anṣārī declared, "The creed (*madhhab*) of the Sufis does not permit supplication, for they believe in eternal pre-ordainment, that is to say: all that was will be."⁵⁶

The Mosque

"Are there Men of God to be found in mosques?" Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī'l-Khayr was asked. "Yes," he replied, "but they can also be found in taverns (*kharābāt*)."⁵⁷

The Direction of Prayer (*qibla*)

Kharaqānī said, "The *qibla*, for the companions of chivalry, is God, for 'Wherever you turn, there is the face of God'." [Koran II 109].⁵⁸

Ritual Prayer (*namāz*)

When Abū Sa'īd ibn Abī'l-Khayr was asked where one should put one's hands when performing one's daily prayers, he replied, "Place your hands upon your heart and set your heart upon God, may He be glorified."⁵⁹

He also said, "Ritual prayer and fasting are the work of devotees (*'ābidān*); removing blemishes and defects from the heart is the work of Men [i.e. realized human beings]."

55. 'Aṭṭār, *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, p. 610.

56. *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, p. 323.

57. *Asrār al-tawhīd*, p. 297.

58. *Aḥwāl wa aqwāl-i Kharaqānī*, p. 75.

59. *Asrār al-tawhīd*, p. 299.

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Enjoining Righteousness; Dissuading from Evil (*amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa nahy az munkar*)

When Bāyazīd was asked about 'enjoining righteousness' and 'dissuasion from evil', he replied, "Inhabit a realm wherein these two are not to be found, for both of these pertain to the realm of created being. On the plane of divine Unity, neither enjoining righteousness nor dissuading from evil exist."⁶⁰

Divine Chastisement (*'adhāb*)

In order to expound the Sufi vision of God's wrath and chastisement, I will conclude my remarks with the following quatrain:

*O God! You said You would subject me to torment.
I wonder how will You undertake this?
Wherever You are there can be no torment
And where is the place where You are not?*

In conclusion, on behalf of Khaniqahi Nimatullahi Publications, I would like to thank all the contributors to this volume for gracing it with the results of their valuable research, thus keeping alight the flame of divine love and humane spirituality in the Fire Temple of Persian Sufism.

*Translated from Persian by
L. Lewisohn*

60. *Tadhkirat al-awliyā'*, p. 199.