

Sufi Practices for the Health of Body and Soul

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Abstract

This paper covers the historic perspective of Sufi traditions and outlines the various practices this tradition has given us, some of which have been adopted by western physicians and practitioners. The practice of retreat and "Dhikr" will be dealt with in detail with information as to the benefits for the body and soul.

Key words: Sufi, ibn Sīnā, meditation

E. W. Lane's Arabic English Lexicon defines the word "Ṣūfī" as a postclassical word meaning one who seeks to raise himself to a high degree of spiritual excellence by contemplation of divine things.

The most commonly accepted explanation of the word's origin is that it is derived from "ṣuf," (wool) and those who wear woolen attire with humbleness. Another explanation is that sufis are those who are first in line, derived from the root "ṣaf" (row).

'Ahl-ul-ṣāfā' were in the Prophet Muḥammad's mosque day and night dedicating themselves to learning from him, abandoning every other worldly need. The number of 'ahl-ul-ṣāfā' varied at any given time. Among them were 'Abū Hurayrah, Bilāl, and Salmān al-Fārisī. Hence, sufis are those who are like 'ahl-ul-ṣāfā.'

Another attractive derivation of sufi is from the word "ṣafā," meaning purity. Dr. Mir Valiuddin said in "The Qur'ānic Sufism"¹ that "some say the sufis were only named sufis because of purity of their hearts and the cleanliness of their acts." Bashīr ibn al-Ḥārith said, "the sufi is he whose heart is sincere towards God."² Junīd al-Baghdādī wrote, "Sufism is not achieved by much praying and fasting but it is security of heart and generosity of soul. The whole of the body is reformed and all the actions improved by purity and

sincerity of heart. The unveiling of divine gnosis is entirely dependent on inner purity."¹

Shaik-al-Islam Zakariyyā Anṣārī summarizes that "sufism teaches how to purify one's self, improve one's morals, and build up one's inner and outer life in order to attain perpetual bliss. Its subject matter is the purification of the soul and its end or aim is the attainment of eternal felicity and blessedness."¹

According to Imam Qushayrī, the word Sufi became popular in the end of second century Hijrī (about the 10th century of C.E.).¹

The question arises as to what term was used for people who had the qualities of sufis before this time? During the Prophet's time and after, they had the title of "ṣaḥāba" or companions. Then came the "Ṭābi'īn" (followers) and then Ṭābi' al-Ṭābi'īn (followers of the followers). They were models for sufis. They all had their special titles.

Mystics of Islam did not confine themselves with only the search of cosmic reality. They also took deep interest in the natural sciences. Sufi practices gave them the freedom of thought and keen intellect, which resulted in the golden age of scientific inquiry and development. Some of them were prolific writers.

Original thinking in various aspects of the medical field, including psychology, was part of this heritage. The whole world, even today, celebrates ibn Sīnā's contributions.

Ibn Miskāwīh and Nāsiruddīn al-Ṭūsī gave us the understanding of evolution and human development, which is

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strikingly modern. About seven centuries ago, Jalāluddīn al-Rūmī was inspired to say the following about evolution (as Robert Bly, the contemporary American poet, renders al-Rūmī's thoughts).²

I lived for thousands and thousands of years
as a mineral.

And then I died and became a plant.

And then I lived for thousands and thousands
of years as a plant.

And then I died and became an animal.

And I lived for thousands and thousands of
years as an animal.

And then I died and became a human being.

Tell me, what have I ever lost by dying?

Keen interest in original writings of sufi masters of old is noted in western publications. Some such works are translated for the first time in English, French, and German from Arabic and Persian.

Islamic spirituality is very appealing to the modern mind. Demand for more understanding and opportunity to experience Sufi practices is rising. People are searching for the straight path. Several organizations representing old traditional "Ṭuruq" or orders (Sufi traditions) have been established in Europe and the Americas. Spontaneous new groups are also in existence. Unfortunately, such groups do not have the background in the "Shari'ah" (jurisprudence) based on the Qur'ān and "Sunnah" (Prophet Muhammad's sayings and traditions). It is up to people who are blessed enough to have such fundamental knowledge to take interest in our sufi heritage and to take the lead.

It was Imam al-Ghazālī who was influential in reconciliation between the shari'ah law and the Sufi path. At the height of his career as an eminent theologian and religious authority, al-Ghazālī left everything in search for the peace of heart. He traveled for several years in Syria, Jerusalem, and possibly Egypt acquiring sufi knowledge. After his enlightenment, he wrote his famous work "Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn," (the Revival of Religious Sciences). He clarified the issues of both al-shari'ah and the "Ṭariqah" (singular of Ṭuruq). Further such clarification and reconciliation occurred by the teachings of 'Abd-ul-Qādir al-Jīlānī.

Muḥannad Ajmal in his article "Sufi Science of the Soul," appearing in the Islamic Spirituality Foundations, states "the heart is the abode of divine light. Divine knowledge can be attained through its activity. God has called it His own abode." Prophet Muḥammad [PBUH] has said that the heart is the house of God. He also said:

"Truly in the body there is a lump of flesh which if it be healthy, all the body is healthy; if it be diseased the whole body is diseased, truly it is the heart."

In Islamic traditions, personality structure depends on these elements:

1. "Al-Rūh" - (the spirit)

2. "Al-Qalb" - (the heart)

3. "Al-Nafs" - (the soul)

The stages of the evolution of the nafs evolves are:

1. "Al-Nafs al-Ḥayawaniyyah": the animal soul, obedient to natural desires and instincts.

2. "Al-Nafs al-'Ammarah": the passionate, egoistic soul.

3. "Al-Nafs al-Lawwāmah": the soul, which is aware of its own imperfections.

4. "Al-Nafs al-Muṭma'innah": the soul at peace, the soul reintegrated in the spirit and at rest in certitude. (Islamic Spirituality Foundations)

There is a struggle between the rūḥ (spirit) and nafs (soul) to overcome the heart. If the nafs wins, the heart is veiled or diseased. Most hearts can never lift the veil of mundane passions and desires that cover the heart. It is described in sufi traditions as rust. This rust can be removed only by persistent invocation, or Dhikr. The Qur'ān states:

"God has sealed off their hearts and their hearing while over their sight there hangs a covering. They will have severe torment. Some people say we believe in Allāh and the last day while they are not believers. They would like to deceive God and those who believe, while they merely outwit themselves and do not notice it. In their hearts is a disease and Allāh increases their disease. Grievous is the penalty they incur because they are false to themselves."³

Struggle with the nafs has been called "al-Jihā al-Akbar" (the greatest struggle) by the Prophet. In another Ḥadīth, the Prophet [PBUH] was quoted to have said:

"You have come to me to ask about righteousness?" The questioner said, "Yes." The Prophet answered, "Consult your heart." Righteousness is that about which the soul feels tranquil and the heart feels tranquil, and wrong doing is that which wavers in the soul and moves to and fro in the breast even though people again and again have given you their legal opinion [in its favor]."⁴

Dr. Mohammad Shafii, in his book, "Freedom From The Self," gives the various stages through which such a struggle occurs:⁵

1. "Al-Tawbah": Repentance

2. "Al-Wara'": Abstinence

3. "Al-Zuhd": Renunciation

4. "Al-Faqr": Poverty

5. "Al-Ṣabr": Patience

6. "Al-Tawakkul": Trust in God

7. "Al-Riḍā": Contentment

At the level of contentment, he states, we achieve "al-Nafs al-ṣāfiyah wal-Kāmilah" (the pure and the accomplished/complete soul).

'Anas [RAA] reported a Ḥadīth about tawba (repentance). Prophet Muḥammad [PBUH] said:

"Allāh the Almighty has said: 'O son of Adam, so long as you call upon Me and ask of Me, I shall forgive you for what you have done, and I shall not

mind. O son of Adam, were your sins to reach the clouds of the sky and were you then to ask forgiveness of Me, I would forgive you. O son of Adam, were you to come to Me with sins nearly as great as the earth and were you then to face Me, ascribing no partner to Me, I would bring you forgiveness nearly as great as your sins."⁴

On renunciation, a Ḥadīth is quoted in Ibn Mājah:

"A man came to the Prophet [PBUH] and said: 'O Messenger of Allāh, direct me to an act which, if I do it, [will cause] Allāh to love me and people to love me.' He said: 'Renounce the world and Allāh will love you, and renounce what people possess and people will love you.'"

Harvard researcher Herbert Benson, MD in his books "The Relaxation Response"⁶ and "Beyond the Relaxation Response,"⁷ came to the conclusion after years of research on meditation that an additional faith factor is needed to harness the healing power of a Muslim's personal beliefs. He is only confirming what sufi masters have taught for centuries. Dikhr is the sufi practice of meditation. It is a practice supported by the Qur'ān and Sunnah. Allāh says:

"Remember me and I will remember you."⁸

"Those who believe, and whose hearts find their rest in the remembrance of God - for verily, in the remembrance of God [men's] hearts do find their rest."⁹

Ḥadīth on the authority of 'Abū Hurayrah [RAA] narrated that the Prophet [PBUH] said:

"Allāh the Almighty says:

'I am as my servant thinks I am. I am with him when he makes mention of Me. If he makes mention of Me to himself, I make mention of him to Myself; and if he makes mention of Me in an assembly, I make mention of him in an assembly. And if he draws near to Me a hand's span, I draw near to him a fathom's length. And if he comes to me walking, I go to him at speed."¹⁰

Al-Ghāzālī in his work, "al-Maqṣad al-'Asnā fī sharh Asmā' Allāh al-Ḥusnā,"¹⁰ gives the sound religious basis for reciting the most beautiful names of Allāh and offers counsel on how an individual can share the divine attributes and make himself more pleasing to God. And hence, to his fellow beings.

Also available now is al-Ghāzālī's "Kitāb al-adḵār wa'l du'ā' (Invocations and Supplications)" in English translation, which enumerates the benefits of Dikhr.¹⁰

The power of Dikhr, in addition to elevating the soul of the practitioner, helps in healing the body, reduces anxiety and depression, helps relieve symptoms related to anxiety, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and constipation. It also reduces the pain of headache, backache, and angina. It reduces blood pressure, corrects insomnia, enhances creativity and can help in treatment of cancer.

Other sufi practices to relieve tension and anxiety are storytelling, poetry, and dream interpretation.

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