

## SUFISM – THE INNER DIMENSION OF ISLAMIC WORSHIP

*“Verily in the Remembrance of Allah do Hearts find Peace” (Qur’an, 13:28)*

He who approaches near to Me one span,  
I will approach near to him one cubit;  
and he who approaches near to Me one cubit,  
I will approach near to him one fathom,  
and whoever approaches Me walking,  
I will come to him running,  
and he who meets me with sins equivalent to the whole world,  
I will greet him with forgiveness equal to it.

*--Hadith Qudsi*

Allah (*swt*) states in the *Qur'an*, “Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts” (22:46), “But only he (will prosper) that brings to Allah a sound heart,” (26: 89). Ultimately, one should seek to nurture the life in his heart (his inner world) as he lives in this world in order to respond to God. These words from the Quran have epitomized some of the essential ideas in the development of Sufism, which can be understood as the innermost dimension of Islamic worship. In this paper, I seek to provide a definitive explanation of what Sufism is, outline some of the major principles prevalent in Sufism, and shed light on the ideologies of two of history’s most celebrated *Sufis*, Imam Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Mawlana Jalauddin Rumi (d. 1273).

As stated by Alhaj W.B.S. Rabbani, “everything has two sides, the exterior and the interior. Its value depends not so much upon its exterior as upon its interior” (21). Likewise, a human being also has two sides—the external and the internal; the visible and the invisible. Ultimately, man’s superiority over the rest of creation depends more heavily upon his inner merits, his intellectual capabilities, his spiritual attainments and the clarity and brilliance of his soul (Rabbani 22). A man’s success is dependent upon the amount of knowledge he has acquired and upon proper use of that knowledge. Accordingly, knowledge of creation can never be complete without sufficient knowledge of the Creator (Nicholson 23). In a *Hadith*, the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him) said, “Allah said I was a Hidden Treasure. I loved to be known so I created the universe” (Rabbani 31). The act by which one becomes a Muslim consists of bearing witness to God’s divine unity (*tawhid*) and attesting to the Prophethood of Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him). Furthermore, rooted in the notion of God’s unique reality, Muslims conceive of life as a journey towards an ultimate destination, back to their One God (Chittick 5). The *Sunna* of Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) has two sides to it—the visible explaining the right way to travel, through ritual activity and

social interaction, codified by jurists, and the invisible subtler dimensions of Muhammad's character emulated on the inner journey, exemplified by the Muslims known as *Sufis* (Chittick 5).

Sufism is essentially understood as Islam's life-giving core and has remained co-extensive with Islam throughout the centuries (Burckhardt 3). Just as no definitive terms were applied to the various religious sciences (i.e. *fiqh* and *kalam*), Sufism did not have its name at the time of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) (Chittick 4). However, Sufism has been prevalent wherever Islam has been prevalent and the name has been applied only after the tradition became diversified and elaborated (Karamustafa 13). Primarily, Sufism can be seen as the interiorization and intensification of Islamic faith and practice (Marmura 23). The terms *sufi* and *mutasawwif* were derived from the Arabic language to refer to devotees of a particular type of piety which later came to be recognized as *Tasawwuf* (Shah 12). During the first century of the Abbasid Rule (8<sup>th</sup> century), *zuhd* or renunciation was a widespread form of piety in Muslim communities. These renunciants and pietists came in different forms with no universal form of piety. While some voluntarily adapted to a life of poverty with no involvement in mainstream social life in order to search for extreme purity, others cultivated the Qur'an and *Hadith* while spending time at a special retreat. Still others became social activists 'commanding right and forbidding wrong' (Karamustafa 15).

Early in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, when the term was first coined, a *sufi* referred to the one who was pure in heart, characterized by the Muslim ascetic who donned worn wool and renounced all worldly attachments (Karamustafa 14). The wearing of worn wool was demonstrative of self-depravation and self-marginalization; putting oneself away from the luxuries of worldly things and being in a state of complete and unquestioning submission to the Divine Will (Burckhardt 23). The Sufis of Baghdad were most predominant in the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century and as they began to detach themselves from mainstream social life, they began the cultivation of inner life and thus arose new discourses on spiritual states, stages of spiritual development, closeness to God and love

(Karamustafa 15). Acquirement of knowledge of the interior (*'ilm-al-bātin'*) through ardent examination of the self and training of the human soul, mind, and body was greatly emphasized (Rabbani 23). The psychological aspect of every renunciator included repentance, turning towards God (*tawba*), and placing one's trust in God (*tawakkul*) through the scrupulous observation of God's divine commands. Ultimately, they believed that true repentance cannot be achieved without rigorous examination of the soul and rigorous training of the bodily desires (Karamustafa 16).

This concern with attaining knowledge of the inner self was paralleled by an effort to discern the inner meanings of the Qur'an and Sunna (Shah 34). This was further developed into the Doctrine of Selection in which knowledge of the soul and understanding of the inner meanings of divine speech and prophetic example were thought to be God-given and not the fruit of human effort. Dispelling from this doctrine was the acknowledgement of the righteous ones or saints (*awliya*, *abdal*, *siddiqun*) (Nicholson 34). As elucidated by many past saints, the friends of God (*walis*) can have the experience of erasing their own identity in the face of God's majesty because they are pulled near God by God Himself as there is an essential link between human spirits and the knowledge of God's unity (Karamustafa 17). Although most believers remain veiled from God's majesty, some spiritual select are driven by desire (*shawq*) and love (*mahabba*) of God to overcome the veils imposed by their lower souls (ego or *nafs*) to achieve nearness to God (Karamustafa 18). The fundamentals of Sufism are based on the claim that 'humankind was created in order to know God and intimate knowledge of God was the first obligation of humans towards God' (Shah 38). Such intimate knowledge of God is the goal of the Sufi but this can ultimately be achieved only by God's blessing (*fazl*), not mere human effort (Faridi 8). In the attempt to be oriented towards God, the Sufi turned away from everything other than God, turned himself over to God and remained attentive to his call. The path that led to God actually was to be found in the heart (Karamustafa 21). The heart created by God is the locus of the human encounter with God Himself. As Professor

Ahmet Karamustafa elucidates, the heart is composed of four layers: the breast (*sadr*; harbors Islam), the heart proper (*qalb*; harbors iman/faith), the inner heart (*fu'ad*; harbors intimate knowledge/*ma'rifa*), and the heart's core (*lubb*; harbors unification or *tawhid*). Islam activates the outer layer and correct practice leads to the activation of the level of faith and this process of a deepening spiritual awakening continues until only God's love remains in the heart (Chittick 37).

Among the various elements of Sufi discipline, *dhikr* is unanimously regarded as the keystone of practical religion. The term *dhikr* signifies 'mentioning,' 'remembering,' or simply 'thinking of' (Chittick 41). The Sufis made a practice of repeating the name of God or some religious formula, e.g. "Glory to Allah" (*subhan Allah*), "There is no god but Allah" (*la ilaha illa 'llah*), accompanying the mechanical intonation with an intense concentration of every faculty upon the single word or phrase, enabling them to enjoy uninterrupted communion with God. Although, the numerous *tariqas* had their own formulas or *dhikr*, the fundamental basis of it is rooted in God's words stated in the Qur'an, "Verily in the Remembrance of Allah do Hearts find Peace" (Qur'an, 13:28). Sufis believe that *dhikr* is essential in order to achieve nearness to God and thus peace of the heart and mind.

The Sufi, calling himself a 'traveler' advances through various slow stages along a path (*tariqa*) to attain nearness to his Creator. Each individual has a separate map for their interior ascent. Some of these were elaborated by Sufi teachers at an early period but this systemization varied over the years and continues to do so today (Nicholson 15). The 'path' expounded in the oldest comprehensive treatise on Sufism, consists of the following seven 'stages': (1) Repentance, (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) satisfaction (acquiescence to the will of God). These 'stages' constitute the *ascetic and ethical* discipline of the Sufi (Nicholson 16-17). In its essence, the mark of true poverty is joy; joy in poverty and composure on occasions of misfortune. Such joy results only from being oriented towards God and severing all

other attachments (Karamustafa 20). The Sufi teachers gradually cultivated a system of asceticism and moral culture in which man denies his lower soul; (ego or *nafs*) through the weaning off from accustomed things and the resistance of its passions (Shah 65). While the 'stages' can be acquired and mastered by one's own efforts, the 'states' (*hāl*) are spiritual feelings and dispositions over which a man has no control and these descend from God into his heart without his being able to repel them when they come or retain them when they go (Rabbani 36).

The spiritual journey in Islam consists of two phases, the first characterized by intoxication (*fana*) resulting in quietism and asceticism as described above, and the second characterized by return to sobriety (*baqa*) with activity and full participation in worldly life (Rabbani 37). Indeed, it is believed that life after completion of the spiritual course is more active, meaningful and real as the seeker has now rid himself of his lower self and has attained Divine qualities to the extent humanly possible. He is, therefore, more honest, more sincere, and kinder than before and is more sympathetic to mankind and thus capable of higher services and sacrifices (Rabbani 38). In the state of *baqa*, one regains an individuality that is God-conscious and no longer self-conscious.

Eventually, some mystics believed that the supreme experience of union with God could not be expressed in words and others who tried to explain it apparently scandalized the orthodoxy of Islam (Karamustafa 65). In time, the bridge between Sufis and scholars came to be crossed in both directions by an increasing number of Sufi-scholars and scholar-Sufis (Karamustafa 106). In the late 11<sup>th</sup> and early 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Islamic philosopher and theologian, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, also known as *Hujjat-ul-Islam (the Proof of Islam)* finally reconciled the orthodox to mysticism through his famous work, *Ihya' 'ulum al-din (Bringing the Religious Sciences to Life)* (Marmura 35). Al-Ghazali was born in Tus in Persia in 1058 and although his father died early in his childhood, al-Ghazali's guardian was entrusted in ensuring that he received a good education. His outstanding intellectual gifts were duly noted and he was thus established as a professor in the Nizamiyyah

College at Baghdad in 1091 where he lectured on Islamic jurisprudence. Four years following that, Al Ghazali fell into a serious spiritual crisis eventually leaving Baghdad and renouncing his career and the world (Marmura 3). As Montgomery Watt explains in his introduction to *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, al-Ghazali came to feel that what mattered above all else was the avoidance of Hell and the attainment of Paradise and his present way of life was too worldly to have any hope of eternal reward (11). In his discontent with the prevailing scholarly ethos of his time, Al-Ghazali expressed sorrow at the disappearance of genuine religious knowledge. Al-Ghazali left Baghdad and went to perform the pilgrimage and then to Syria. He envisioned a total reformation of the Islamic sciences as consisting of six disciplines. During his personal spiritual crisis, Al-Ghazali realized that his academic articulation of Islam needed to be and must be upheld by a genuine spiritual grounding (Karamustafa 107). Thus the sixth discipline of his reformulated curriculum of Islamic knowledge is ‘inner science’ (*ilm-al-batin*), or Sufism (Nicholson 54).

Although Al-Ghazali began his career with the study of theology, philosophy, and the natural sciences, they failed to satisfy him in his search for truth (Abulaylah 16). In his book, *Deliverance from Error and Mystical Union with the Almighty*, Al-Ghazali explains that true knowledge is derived from divine inspiration; from faith rather than from the dictates of dry logic (17). Rather than accepting the easy but blind conformism of *taqlid*, Al-Ghazali attempted to seize the deep basic reality of things, especially of the human itself as it opened to the divine. Al Ghazali occupies a unique position among Islamic philosophers in recommending doubt within the boundary of faith. He says that “anyone who does not doubt will not investigate, and anyone who does not investigate cannot see, and anyone who does not see will remain in blindness and error”. He considered skepticism as a source of knowledge and discovery (19).

Al-Ghazali classified the prevailing doctrines of his day into four main groups: scholastic theology, based on logic and reason; *Batinism* or esotericism, based on initiation; philosophy, based

on logic and proof; and Sufism, based on unveiling and receptiveness thereto (Watt 23). He also held that the means whereby knowledge could be attained were: the senses, reason and revelation. In the end, he came to prefer Sufism and revelation (inspiration), and since it was difficult or impossible to reconcile the imperatives of this world with those of the hereafter, he left Baghdad in the search for truth. In his autobiography, Al-Ghazali explained why he renounced his brilliant career and turned to Sufism. It was, he says, due to his realization that there was no way to ascertain knowledge or the conviction of revelatory truth except through Sufism (Ghazali 35). He mastered philosophy and then criticized it in order to Islamicize it. The importance of his criticism lies in his philosophical demonstration that the philosophers' metaphysical arguments cannot stand the test of reason (Marmura 23). However, he was also forced to admit that the certainty, of revelatory truth, for which he was so desperately searching, cannot be obtained by reason. It was only later that he finally attained to that truth in the ecstatic state (*fana*) of the Sufi. Through his own religious experience, he worked to revive the faith of Islam by reconstructing the religious sciences and to give a theoretical foundation to Sufism under the influence of philosophy (Watt 31). Al-Ghazali emphasized that the individual should strive to attain the Divine Presence and the good Sufi must live in peace with the rest of the community. His interpretation of Islam stressed the personal and emotional relationship of the individual to God (Marmura 56). Al-Ghazali's compendium was regarded as a complete guidebook on piety addressed to the common people. He hoped that his guidebook would serve a therapeutic function and his goal was to infuse religious life with a new spirit which would be developed through a consistent emphasis on the heart as he viewed the heart as hinge between the visible and the invisible worlds (Karamustafa 108). In order to avoid scholastic speculation, Al-Ghazali focused on the practical matters and refrained from going into theoretical details about the nature of the spiritual heart. According to W. M. Watt's analysis, Al-Ghazali



endorsed a moderate, practical version of Sufism in which the path to piety lied between the solitary life and life in society (37).

With the development of specialized Sufi literature, the Sufi tradition emerged as a major social and cultural phenomenon. This shaping of Sufism as a distinct culture was evident in the formation of local communities (or brotherhoods) around major Sufi master and these communities varied reflecting the complex nature of the Sufi *shaykhs* and their social personalities (Karamustafa 114). One of the most influential founders of these communities or orders was the Persian poet Jalauddin Rumi. Rumi was born in 1207 in Balkh, which had been one of the greatest centers for the study, practice, and inculcation of Islamic mysticism (Thackston 7). As his father was one of the leading theologians, preachers and masters of Sufism, the young Rumi was thus heavily influenced and received a thorough education in the Arabic and Persian classical and religious studies along with extensive study of the Quran and *Hadith*. After the death of his father, Rumi received his formal spiritual training by one of his father's disciples and later on took to teaching and ministering his own pupils and disciples (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love - The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*). Rumi's father was a protagonist of an intensely personal and passionate religion designed to lead men back from mere scholastic dogma into living contact with the Quran and *Hadith* (Thackston 9). Like his father and Al-Ghazali before him, Rumi believed that rationalism had reduced Islam to a mere dogma (Marmura 73). For Rumi, the Qur'an was a God-given guidance to the way of all human life; for a king and commoner alike (Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love - The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi*).

In the year 1244, the enigmatic figure Sham-al-din of Tabriz came to Konya and Rumi was thus transformed from a sober jurisprudent into an intoxicated celebrant of the mysteries of Divine Love (Thackston 12). Rumi wrote of metaphysical love—that which is beyond the physical and not understood by all, as for Rumi, Divine Reality is the limitless object of desire. Within the soul the

divine breath lies in wait for the seekers. There alone do the lovers find the Beloved (Rumi 23). For Rumi, the *sema* (listening to spiritual poetry, recited with or without instruments) was an emotional relationship between man and his God. The love thus symbolized is the emotional element in religion, the rapture of the seer, the courage of the martyr, the faith of the saint, the only basis of moral perfection and spiritual knowledge. Practically, it is self-renunciation and self-sacrifice, the giving up of all possessions for the Beloved's sake without any thought of reward (Nicholson 48). "Love," says Jalaluddin Rumi, "is the remedy of our pride and self-conceit; the physician of all our infirmities. Only he whose garment is rent by love becomes entirely unselfish" (Rumi, Signs of the Unseen – The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi).

According to Rumi, knowledge comes by illumination, revelation, and inspiration as illustrated by his famous saying, "Look in your own heart, for the kingdom of God is within you" (Rumi 45). He further elucidates a *Hadith* in one of his sayings, "he who truly knows himself knows God," for the heart is a mirror in which every divine quality is reflected; but just as a steel mirror when coated with rust loses its power of reflection, so the inward spiritual sense or the eye of the heart, is blind to the celestial glory until the dark obstruction of the phenomenal self, with all its sensual contaminations, has been wholly cleared away and the clearance of it is done effectively only by the work of God and a certain inward cooperation by the man" (Nicholson 48). Furthermore, the inward cooperation of a man that Nicholson's analysis refers to includes spiritual exercises that a person indulges in, such as fasting, praying, *dhikr*, and so on. In his time, Rumi set out to establish a moral psychology that helped set the path of this spiritual journey for each aspirant (Shah 57).

Like Rumi, Al-Ghazali used a series of traditional Sufi teachings to illustrate the theme of the heart as a mirror. The light of the divine sun can only shine in the heart when the seeker recalls the Prophet's teaching that 'everything has a polish, and the polish of hearts is the remembrance of

God. ' Bad character traits, acquired through faulty upbringing, are like 'a smoke which clouds the heart's mirror'. But the one who has polished his heart is made luminous by God's light, and brings that light to others, which is the quality of sainthood (Marmura 76). The essentiality of Rumi and Al-Ghazali's ideologies paralleled in various examples even though their practices diverged. Both emphasized the heart as the locus of the human encounter with God Himself and the denouncement of the lower self (*nafs*) in aspirations of attaining nearness to God Almighty.

Ibn Khaldun, Muslim statesman, jurist, historian, and scholar of the fourteenth century, devoted a long section of in his monumental work, *al-Muqaddimah*, to discuss the science of Sufism in which he emphasized the originality of Sufism in Islam. He states, "The sufi approach is based upon constant application to divine worship, complete devotion to God, aversion to false splendor of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, property, and position to which great mass aspires, and the retirement from the world into solitude for divine worship. These things were general among the men around Muhammad (Peace be Upon Him) and the early Muslims and then when worldly aspirations increased, the special name of *Sufis* was given to those who aspired to Divine Worship" (Khaldun 46). The science of Sufism has become a systemically treated discipline, whereas previously it consisted merely of Divine Worship and its laws existed only in the breasts of men. It is important to remember that, "a servant will only reach Allah through Allah and by being in harmony with his loved one (the Prophet, Peace be Upon Him) through his laws (*shari'a*). And whoever believes that he can follow a path without emulating [the Prophet (Peace be Upon Him)] will become lost, on account of imagining that he is being guided" (Shah 91). Undoubtedly, for all but a minority of Sufis throughout history, carefully observing the *shari'a* has been a crucial and on-going component of their spiritual practice. As Ibn Sina (Avicenna) concluded, the Sufi path can be traveled only by devotion and practice and not by reading and research (Marmura 89).

## Appendix 1:

Hadith of Jealousy: (Tirmidhi & Ahmad ibn Hanbal)

*Know that God has servants who are neither prophets nor martyrs and who are envied by the prophets and martyrs for their position and their nearness to God... on the Day of Resurrection thrones of light will be placed at their disposal. Their faces will be of light... these are the awliyā of God*

Hadith Qudsi –

*Allah said, “The heavens and the earth cannot contain Me, but the heart of my believe servant does contain Me.”*

Hadith –

*The Messenger of God (Peace be Upon Him) says: ‘The people are dreaming; when they die, they become awake.’ So perhaps life in this world is a dream by comparison with the world to come; and when a man dies, things come to appear differently to him from what he now beholds, and at the same time the words are addressed to him: ‘We have taken off thee thy covering, and thy sight today is sharp’*

## Appendix 2: *The Words of Al-Ghazali (Abulaylah 19)*

*With light the face of Your Majesty was revealed.  
And I wondered.  
And in You all-manifest, lay my confusion  
O You are the nearest of things.  
You have revealed Yourself, filling my view  
With Your manifestation of light, but becoming hidden  
In a way which nearly left me without faith.  
When You hid Yourself You threw between mind  
And senses a difference that brooks no compromise  
If mind claims to know Your Presence and denies the sense, who called it impossible  
The senses say to the mind stop here.  
This is because the senses deny you O God as a picture to be seen and the mind sees You through  
abstract evidence*

\* \* \*

*God has sent on earth a hundred and twenty-four thousand  
prophets to teach men the prescription of his alchemy  
and how to purify their hearts from baser qualities in the crucible of  
abstinence. This alchemy may be briefly described as turning  
away from the world to God, and its constituents are four:  
One – the knowledge of self  
Two – the knowledge of God  
Three – the knowledge of this world as it really is  
Four – the knowledge of the next world as it really is*

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