



The Board of Islamic Publications

# UNDERSTANDING SUFISM

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By Dr. WAQUAR ANWAR

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ، قَالَ كَانَ النَّبِيُّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ بَارِزًا يَوْمًا لِلنَّاسِ، فَأَتَاهُ جِبْرِيلُ فَقَالَ مَا الْإِيمَانُ قَالَ " الْإِيمَانُ أَنْ تُؤْمِنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَبِلِقَائِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ، وَتُؤْمِنَ بِالْبَعْثِ ". قَالَ مَا الْإِسْلَامُ قَالَ " الْإِسْلَامُ أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكَ بِهِ، وَتُقِيمَ الصَّلَاةَ، وَتُؤَدِّيَ الزَّكَاةَ الْمَفْرُوضَةَ، وَتَصُومَ رَمَضَانَ ". قَالَ مَا الْإِحْسَانُ قَالَ " أَنْ تَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ كَأَنَّكَ تَرَاهُ، فَإِنْ لَمْ تَكُنْ تَرَاهُ فَإِنَّهُ يَرَاكَ ".

One day while the Prophet (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) was sitting in the company of some people, (The angel) Gabriel came and asked, "What is faith?" Allah's Messenger ﷺ replied, 'Faith is to believe in Allah, His angels, (the) meeting with Him, His Apostles, and to believe in Resurrection.' Then he further asked, "What is Islam?" Allah's Messenger (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) replied, "To worship Allah Alone and none else, to offer prayers perfectly to pay the compulsory charity (Zakat) and to observe fasts during the month of Ramadan." Then he further asked, "What is *Ihsan* (perfection)?" Allah's Messenger (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) replied, "To worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you cannot achieve this state of devotion then you must consider that He is looking at you."

(Bukhari Hadith Jibril on *Ihsan*)

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## Preface

This book is intended to provide introductory material on Sufism, encompassing its history and underlying concepts. The characteristic features of both the strands of Sufism – *tazkiyatun nafs* (self-purification) and *marifa* (gnosis) – have been discussed. References for those who intend to do further studies have been provided.

The issues in which Sufis of both the strands are concerned have been studied with references to the primary sources of Islamic Shari'ah: The Qur'an and the Sunnah (traditions) of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him).

For the ease of understanding, the Anglo-Arabic expression "Sufism" has been preferred to the Arabic term "Tasawwuf."

Janab Waris Hussain initially asked me to write a treatise on Sufism, reposing confidence that I can do this. Further, he kept on reminding and discussing the subject intermittently, keeping the project alive. This work could not have been possible in absence of his encouragements and the constant prompts. I provided the manuscript to two persons who are authority on the subject: Dr. Syed Jamaluddin, Director, Historical Projects of Institute of Objective Studies (IOS), New Delhi, and former Professor of History at Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi and; Janab Shabbir Alam Khan, a well-read gentleman who was formerly associated with the Administrative Function of Magadh University, Gaya. Professor Jamaluddin vetted, approved and liked the contents after an overall examination and Janab Shabbir Alam Khan studied the text, word by word, and provided useful feed-back. In fact, the last chapter was added on his suggestion. I express my deep-felt gratitude to these three gentlemen and pray to Allah, The Magnificent, to bestow His Mercy on them and reward them with success, here and hereafter. Amen!

Initial chapters of the books were edited by Janab Sikandar Azam, editor, Radiance Viewswweekly, Delhi. Later, Janab Syed Nooruzzaman, Ex-Deputy Editor, The Tribune, Chandigarh, India who is now a columnist based in New Delhi, meticulously edited the whole book. It gives me utmost satisfaction that these senior journalists and language experts were kind enough to edit the work. I am deeply obliged to them and pray to Allah to reward them in most befitting manner. Amen!

However, I am fully responsible for the contents of this treatise and would be obliged for providing any feedback with regard to any kind of error or discrepancy which might have crept into despite utmost humanly possible care. As the corollary goes, the undersigned is expecting reward from the Almighty and Compassionate Allah for everything good in this effort and prays that the mistakes and faults are pardoned by Him and the efforts made are made beneficial to the readers. Amen!

New Delhi  
13<sup>th</sup> May, 2021/30<sup>th</sup> Ramadhan, 1442

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## SUFISM: DEFINITION AND HISTORY

Islamic Law (Shari'ah) encompasses two aspects: the outward requirement of the law referred to as *Fiqh* and inward aspect of practices comprising the intent, spirit, sincerity and depth of convictions. The latter aspect has many names, including terms like *tazkia* (purification) and *ihسان* (actions in the most beautiful form stemming from the awareness of Allah's presence), which are described in the Qur'an and the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him). Another term for this subtle and intimate aspect of Shari'ah, although not found in the primary sources of Islamic knowledge in this nomenclature, which later became popular in common parlance, is Sufism. So, *fiqh* deals with the observable conduct, the fulfilling of a duty, while Sufism is concerned with the spirit of the conduct. For example, when one says the obligatory prayer, *salat*, *fiqh* will judge only by the fulfilment of the outward requirements such as ablution, facing towards the Ka'bah and other apparent formats of this prayer. Sufism, on the other hand, will judge prayers by one's concentration and devotion and by their effect on morals and manners. Obviously, both of these aspects of the prayer are necessary ingredients of the ritual. There cannot be any *salat* (prayer) without abiding its format and outward conditions. But a prayer devoid of spirit, though correct in appearance, content and form, may not result in the desired objective of earning pleasure of the Almighty Allah. Rather, the insincerity of the intent may result in His displeasure.

The term Sufism was not in use at least up to about 200 years after the beginning of the Islamic calendar, the Hijra. But that is not an issue as such because several terms nowadays in common use with reference to Islamic studies developed after considerable time. Even some terms in use during the days of the Prophet (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him), described in a particular sense in the Qur'an and the sunnat (prophetic traditions), are not used exactly in the same sense today. The case of the word '*nafi*' may be cited here which today does not include sunnat whereas the word in the primary sources of Islamic knowledge encompasses every action beyond the obligatory acts, including sunnat. New terms do develop in the course of time connoting new meanings. Similar are the cases of terms like *sadaqua* and *zakat*. Several other cases may also be cited.

However, the case of the word Sufism has unique characteristics. It will be a simplistic approach and naive to say that it is synonymous with the terms like *tazkia* or *ihسان*, used in the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions. A more sophisticated, clear and erudite statement will be to say that Sufism has its own specific features and attributes, including its exclusive methodologies, known as *tariqah* (methodology), developed over the time to achieve its objectives. Nevertheless, the objectives of the *tariqah* of Sufism are similar to those taught by the Qur'an and the prophetic traditions and practised by the Prophet (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) and his companions (may Allah be pleased with them) which may be referred to as Shari'ah. Both strive to inculcate piety in the followers of the faith.

### DEFINITION

The exponents and practitioners of Sufism and writers on the subject tend to define it in two ways. According to the first approach, it is concerned with the internal state of the soul as against its external manifestations and behaviour. Sufism can be understood in terms of 'the code of the

heart' (*fiqhul batin*) or 'purification of the soul' (*tazkiyatun nafi*). The other approach to understand Sufism is to define it as a quest for truth which is called *marifah* (gnosis) that means acquiring divine knowledge and insight based on personal experience or perception. We may, for the ease of reference, call the former as the *tazkia-e-batin* approach and the latter as the *marifah* approach. The need to describe the two approaches severally arises because we find two sets of great men and women attached with Sufism, subscribing to one of these. However, some of the names of Sufis (practitioners of Sufism), in exceptional cases although, may be found in both groups. Obviously, such classification of approaches may not have a clear line of demarcation. However, it helps us understand related issues in a clear manner. Such broad classification based on specific lives and teachings of prominent Sufis will help us develop proper appreciation of related concepts and practices of these extraordinary persons who have left recognisable, typical and important marks in human history.

Great masters of Sufism like Junayd (d. 297/909), Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 561/1166) and Shihabuddin Suhrawardi (d. 632/1234) may be grouped to the first approach of *tazkia-e-batin*. The latter approach of *marifah*, quest for reality, has Sufis like al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and Ibnul-Arabi (d. 638/1240). Nevertheless, there are great persons like Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1634) whose name figures in both approaches. May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them. A distinguishing phenomenon of the former approach is that their exponents speak in the language of common men and address their real-life issues which has made them popular among the masses. The proponents of the *marifah* approach, on the other hand, are more academically inclined and their ideas can be appreciated and understood by men with an intellectual bent of mind having specific tastes. A common practising person of the faith stands to lose nothing if he is not aware of the concerns raised by the Sufis of the *marifah* approach.

We intend to deliberate briefly, later in this write-up, on the life and deeds of some of these great Sufis, as mentioned above, and some others.

## HISTORY OF SUFISM

From the beginning of the second century some aspects of the *tariqah* of Sufism came to be emphasised more than before. This new development may be correlated with and justified in the light of developments in the society around. The rapid and phenomenal growth of Islamic empire after the demise of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) resulted in an unprecedented flow of wealth to Madinah, the capital of the state. The risk that this would impact badly upon the quality of life and piety of the inhabitants was first raised by a great companion of the Prophet, Abudhar Ghifari (may Allah be pleased with him). He was saddened by the lust for luxury and giving preference to the life in this world over the life hereafter. He criticised people's pursuit of worldly goods and pleasures, and raised his concerns in such a vociferous manner that the caliph of the time, Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him), had to order him to leave Madinah and go to Rubdhah, a small village nearby.

Ali ibn abi Talib (may Allah be pleased with him), who was named the caliph after the death of Uthman, shifted the capital of the Islamic state from Madinah to Kufa in Iraq. Political developments at that time were saddening. Feuds arose first between Ali ibn abi Talib and Ayesha, wife of the Prophet (may Allah be pleased with her) and then between Muawiyah (may Allah be pleased with him) and the caliph. The position adopted by the companions of the prophet were varied. Some of them sided with any of these persons in the ensuing disputes while others decided to keep themselves aloof from the confusing disputes and all the factions that had emerged. There

were others who opted to join hands with the government in essential services like *jihad bis-saif* (wars at the borders with the enemies of Islam). Yet others devoted themselves to the development of religious and educational scholarships. They advised others too to concentrate on their innate selves by acquiring knowledge (*ilm*), concentrating on their religious practices and developing the innate qualities of heart and mind so that their relationship with Allah may improve and they please Him.

This approach of shunning public services and avoiding government offices was adopted by many men of learning in the days to come, including the disciples of the companions of the Prophet, called *Tabi'un* in Islamic literature, who were wary of growing affluence in society and tendencies to worldly pleasures at the cost of a responsible pious life as envisaged in Islam. It is obvious that the wrong practices and debased lifestyle were the hallmarks of some rulers, administrators, public servants, the authorities associated with palaces and other players in the corridors of power. The reverent preachers of goodness tried their level best to keep the masses away from the ill-effects of such a worldly life-style as was devoid of accountability before Allah, the Almighty. They reminded the people that such disregard for the requirements of the religion may lead to punishments hereafter and the torments of hell-fire. This approach became a trend.

Historically speaking, this methodology (*tariqah*) of withdrawing from public life, accepting poverty as the desired way of life and rejection of all material goods became a growing tendency, rather a movement, as such. "This trend was initiated by Hasan (d. 111/729) at Basrah, Ibrahim bin Adham (d. 161/778) in Syria, and Fudayl b. 'Iyad (d. 187/803) in Khurasan. However, the most prominent role in the movement was played by the disciples and followers of Hasan such as Malik bin Dinar (d. 131/748), Farqad al-Sabakhi (d. 131/748), Ayyub al-Sakhtiyani (d. 163/780), 'Abd al-Wahid bin Zayd (d. 177/793) and Muhammad bin Wasi." [Ansari, Abdul Haq (2015), p. 10]. May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them.



## CHARACTERISTIC FEATURES OF SUFISM

Yearning for closeness to the Almighty Allah and development of single-minded, utmost and humanly possible sincerity in the efforts for this goal are the hallmarks of Sufism. This results in the enhancement of piety of a higher order achieved by a select few people who are far more pious than the common man. Sufism produced a galaxy of such pious, dedicated and virtuous persons in almost all parts of the earth. This is also true about all ages in Islamic history. It may be regarded as a movement with its own characteristic features and typical methodologies. These specific features and methodologies developed over a period of time as a result of experimentations of a number of practitioners of Sufism, the Sufis.

This movement is not the outcome of the efforts of any single person or any single book. In fact, a number of parallel practices have developed, described as Sufi Orders (*silsila*), emanating from the diversity of spiritual experiences of great sufis like the diversity of opinion in explaining the Shari'ah by great fuqaha. The popular Sufi Orders include the Chishti, named after Khawja Mawdood Chisti; the Suhrawardi, named after Shihabuddin Suhrawardi; the Qadiri, named after Abdul Qadir Jilani; and the Naqshbandi, named after Bahauddin Naqshband Bukhari. May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them. These orders have further produced sub-orders (*silsila* within *silsila*). As for example, Firdausi, a popular Sufi order which has a remarkable presence in India, is a sub-order of the Suhrawardi order.

All these Sufi orders provide specific methodologies, known as their *suluk*, for training and self-upgradation of their disciples. These are mostly *dhikrs* (remembering Allah by repeating words, phrases or verses of the Qur'an by tongue and concentrating and contemplating on their meaning in the heart). The *dhikr* may be different for different pupils and for different stages in the process of their self-development, depending upon the capability and taste of the trainee and the prescription of the guide. These methodologies are strictly followed under the expert supervision of a competent teacher.

Although all these Sufi orders and sub-orders have their specific methods of providing teaching and imparting trainings to their disciples, they have remarkable similarity in some features. And so, these features characterise Sufism. These characteristic features are related to the practices of achieving specific stages in the process of self-development known as *fana*, *baqa* and *ubudiyah*. One more thing with which all these systems agree and experience is *kashf*. An appreciation of these concepts would provide a clear idea of the subject under discussion.

**FANA:** *Fana* may be translated in English with expressions like disappearance, vanishing, going into oblivion, receding, fading, merging or dissolving. In the quest for this stage, a Sufi practitioner (*salik*) following the methodology, particularly prescribed *dhikr* in his Sufi order, practices to discard his persona, self-obsession and preferences to the Existence and Will of Allah, the Exalted, as if nothing exists other than Him. The *salik*, in a sense, recedes own-self and merges his will and person into that of the Almighty. Another term used for this stage is *jam* (union). A Sufi at this stage experiences that everything around like the world, the people and the feelings

have no meaning, worth or value and what matters is the Existence and Will of Allah. This is a very absorbing and intoxicating stage and some Sufis may not be able to come out of this trance. They may utter incoherent words and give statements which have unclear or ambiguous meanings. This is called *sukr* (intoxicating) stage and words and expressions uttered in this juncture are called *shath*. The experience of *fana* and intoxication (*sukr*) weakens their sense of discrimination, and makes them utter words that they later, after becoming sober, may realise to be erroneous. Some of them may do things under intoxication which the Shari'ah does not approve of. Obviously, if any word, expression or action conflicts with the Shari'ah, that should be recognised as such and should be rejected as wrong; the Sufi concerned, however, should not be condemned but rather excused as he might have said them under intoxication (*sukr*).

Most of the Sufis, particularly those treading the path under expert supervision, come out of this union stage and move forward to the *baqa* stage.

**BAQA and UBUDIYAH:** *Baqa* literally means to survive, to continue, to persist, to endure, to live, to exist. So, it is the life after the *fana* stage of a *salik* (seeker of Sufism). Thus, he comes out of the experience of union with Allah to the realisation that he is His servant. This is also referred to as the stage of *ubudiyah* (servant-hood). The feeling of union with Allah and annihilation of the self and denial of everything besides Him is taken over by the realisation of the self and the world around in a different perspective. Now, everything is placed in another perception and relative position. This is also known as the stage of DIFFERENCE. It is worth taking note of that before a *salik* begins this journey of Sufism he is also in the stage of 'Difference' and at the completion of this journey the stage of 'difference' reappears. So, it also refers to the journey from DIFFERENCE to DIFFERENCE. But there is a qualitative difference between the initial and the final stages. In the beginning, the person was not fully aware of the real Existence and the Exalted Position of the Almighty Allah. The person was aware of his own self and was striving for achieving self-desires and pleasures of mundane life. In a sense, the person was indifferent to the real positioning of his own being vis-à-vis that of Allah, the Exalted. The final stage of DIFFERENCE is that he is now fully aware of the Existence of the Creator, the real Master and he is able to place himself in the position of a servant of the Creator. The self-desires, self-importance and longing for a good life in this world is taken over by full submission to the Will of the Almighty Allah. This is the process of purification of human life through the *Tariqah* (methodology) of Sufism.

The process of achieving this final stage of *baqa* purifies the inner-self (*tazkia-e-batin*) wherein all human lust of a good life in the world, including ego, self-esteem and considering oneself as important and worthy and better than other creatures, wanes and the *salik* realises oneself as a mere servant of the Creator where the purpose of life is to become His obedient servant in the true sense. Thus, from self-annihilation experienced in *fana* a sufi graduates to self-realisation in the *baqa* stage. The Creator is one while His creations are so many, including the *salik*. This means that other human beings too have the same importance as oneself. Hence, everyone else deserves to be honoured and served. Disregarding or disrespecting and not serving properly fellow human beings would result in the displeasure of the Creator.

A *salik* (seeker) in Sufism passes through noteworthy landmarks in his journey of seeking the truth. He begins his journey like the common man, a self-centred person engrossed in the routine day-to-day life of seeking pleasure and acquiring self-gratification. Then he realises that all that he was engaged in was devoid of a purpose in life. His life and actions were futile and so he should find

refuge in the Being of the Creator. In this quest, he gets fully absorbed and immersed so much so that he reaches the stage of self-annihilation. For him nothing, even his own being, has any meaning or importance and the sole reality is the Existence of Allah.

Some *salik* may remain captivated in this new realisation of nothing-but-Allah phenomenon for a longer stage while others, with the assistance of the teacher who has been guiding his development, may come out of this feeling with a new set of realisations. Now he is able to see things in their relative positions – The Creator and His creations. Now his own aim in life is to serve Allah as a humble servant. He is no more a self-centred person as he was in the beginning. He is no more seeking the mundane satisfaction of a good life. Good food, good clothes, good position among fellow human beings or a good amount of power, all get meaningless and lose their ‘goodness’ as such. Only the servant-hood (*ubudiyah*) of Allah matters and nothing else has any meaning. The feeling of self-importance vis-à-vis other human beings is gone. He is himself a modest servant of Allah, like all other persons. Hence, in order to serve Allah, he has to serve His creatures, all other human beings. Now they are selfless servants of the Kingdom of Allah. That is why almost all prominent men associated with Sufism have been able to serve the humanity at large to the best of their abilities. That is one of the reasons for their mass appeal and the love and affection they garner across the board.

**KASHF:** In the process of their *suluk* (methodology/practices) for achieving designed goals, Sufis may come across extraordinary phenomena of dreams, extraordinary visions, direct heavenly ideas in their hearts and voices and talks to appearances. These are sources of knowledge in addition to the senses, reasons and intuitions, discovered by Sufis from their studies of the Qur’an and the sunnah (prophetic traditions) and experiments, referring them by names like Allah-given knowledge (*ilmladunni*), vision (*mushahadah*), illumination (*tajalli*), dream (*ruya*) etc. Often these are referred by the words *kashf* and *ilham*. *Kashf* means knowledge, vision, and inspirations received, revealed and uncovered through mystical means. Sufis experiment this form of inspirational knowledge. These appear similar to the experiences of prophets, including their dreams, visions, auditions and inspirations and *wahy* (revelations).

However, these are two different experiences altogether. The basic difference of a prophet’s revelation and sufi’s *kashf* is that the former is universal, coherent and in the stage of consciousness whereas the latter is personal, incoherent and, may be, in the stage of unconsciousness. The occurrences of the prophets are true and certain and are binding on them and on their followers as the exact source of articles of faith and practices enshrined through them to the mankind. The *kashf* of the Sufis are fallible and uncertain (*zanni*). It is a very individualistic experience which differs from person to person and so it cannot be an infallible source which can tell with certainty what is right or wrong or obligatory or otherwise. It can be relied upon only when it does not contradict the Shari’ah. Obviously, the Qur’an and Sunnah (prophetic traditions) are the authority that delineate articles of faith and describe the requirements of actions emanating therefrom. In other words, *kashf* of a *sufi* is not a source of Shari’ah and so

it is neither binding on the sufi nor on others. The *kashf* of one sufi may be an argument for him, but not for others. This can be understood by another analogy. If a person sees the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) in dream and gets an instruction, that would only be relevant for him and he cannot bind others to abide by this revelation in dream. Despite the faith that seeing the Prophet in dream is a real-life experiment, a dream, even of this nature, cannot be a source of Shari'ah. Hence, unlike an *ijtihad* of a jurist (ruling of a jurist in Shari'ah) which is an argument for him and for others, *kashf* can be an effective inclination solely for the person/sufi experiencing that.

It would be worthwhile to distinguish between a rule of the Shari'ah and its application in a particular situation. So far as the rule is concerned, there is no role for *kashf*. However, *kashf* may have a place in the application of the rule. *Kashf* may also be helpful in making a decision in cases which are vague and unclear; where arguments from the Shari'ah conflict and one does not see what course one should take. In such cases, the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) has advised to consult one's heart. [Ansari, Abdul Haq (2015), pp 79-85]

Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi has discussed in detail the usefulness and limitations of *kashf*, making the point that *kashf* of sufis is not an independent source of knowledge parallel to a revelation. It can only act as an interpreter of the prophetic revelation (*wahy*) concerning matters of faith. It may reveal the hidden truths (of faith) which ordinary people are not able to see. At this juncture, it is advisable to add the caveat that the *kashf* of a sufi is subject to the authority not only of the text of the Qur'an and the Sunnat, but also of their interpretation by a theological reason. The views of the founders of the four great Sufi orders are not different from the views of Sirhindi. We may safely ascribe these views to the sufis of the *tazkia-e-batin* approach.

Al-Ghazali, the prominent sufi of *marifah* (gnosis) approach gives more weight to *kashf*, considering it to be a dependable instrument of interpretation of faith. However, despite believing that *kashf* as such is trustworthy, he added the proviso: 'it should not contradict a clear and unequivocal statement of the Qur'an and the Sunnat, or violate the fundamental rules of reason, or an established truth. [*ibid*, pp 71-73]



## MARIFAH (GNOSIS) APPROACH OF SUFISM

The history of *marifah* (gnosis) approach, which is a quest for the reality of transcendent issues, begins late in the Islamic scholarship. As these issues do not affect the lives of common practising persons, it is not addressed to them. These are areas of interest and concern for persons with an intellectual bent of mind engaged in discourses which were either the outcome of their specific tastes or were imported from other systems of philosophies and faiths.

First such questions were raised regarding the role of reason vis-a-vis revelation in the quest of knowledge. These debates were the outcome of the impact of Greece philosophies when writings of Aristotle and other philosophers were translated into the Arabic language. At one time, it swayed the mind of a number of scholars who argued that the basis of knowledge of truth and understanding the nature of anything as 'good' or 'bad', desirable or undesirable and acceptable or deserving rejection is the intellect (mind) of man. Even the existence or otherwise of Allah was subjected to this test, making revelations received by the last Prophet and passed on to generations in the form of the Qur'an, the Words of Allah, and the traditions (sunnat) of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him), became irrelevant or at least subject to confirmation by intellect. It created a great hue and cry. But, a great scholar of Islam, Al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111), took to task the deliberations and almost crippled the base of the primacy of reason over revelation. He established the role of revelation in the language of philosophers and silenced the debate and settled the importance of revelations for good. Al-Ghazali later engaged himself in the methodologies of Sufism (*suluk*) and is regarded as one of the foremost sufis.

Academic discussions that emerged later centred on two specific areas: Those related to the attributes of Allah; and those related to relationship between Allah and His Creations. All these discussions produced a high quality of scholarships, institutions and personalities. It will be beyond the scope of this book to go into the details of these discourses, their history and impact. We would suffice it by a brief discussion that follows, which will give some ideas about the developments. However, a caveat is noted that these discussions are abstract and hypothetical in nature and the common practising masses have never been affected by these because Islam, in its simple and puritan form, is enough to cater to all their needs of faith and ensuing practices.

### SCHOLASTIC DEVELOPMENT RELATED TO ALLAH AND HIS ATTRIBUTES

The Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (hadees) use certain words, phrases as verbs, adjectives or noun to describe Allah. Different groups of scholars have taken different approaches regarding these attributes of Allah.

- One group of scholars opine that it is not possible to understand what these expressions actually mean. So, we confirm all of these attributes literally without any idea of our own as to what exactly they mean. This is known as accepting expressions about the attributes of Allah without ascribing any meaning from ourselves. It is called confirming attributes without thinking 'how' (*bila kaif*). These scholars belong to *athary*/Hambli theology/modern strand of *salafis/ahle-hadees* and this approach is attributed to Imam Ahmad bin Hambal, a great theologian in whose name the Hambli school of jurisprudence emerged.
- Another group of scholars say that they can understand and so affirm only some of the attributes of Allah like: Life; Knowledge; Will; Power; See; Hear; and Speech and take their

literal meanings. Regarding other attributes they take the position of either going blank on their meaning or understanding them as symbolic and so go for reinterpretation (*ta'weel*) of their meaning. This approach is attributed to another great scholar of Islam, Abul Hasan Ali al-Ash'ari (d. 324/935), and this is referred to as the Ash'ari school of thought. Scholars related to Maliki and Shafai schools of jurisprudence have accepted this position.

- Another school of understanding the attributes of Allah is known as Matrudi theology, named after Abu Manşur al-Maturidi (d. 333/944), which is similar to the Ash'ari approach with some technical details like further attributes of Allah that can be assigned any meaning. The Hanafi school of jurisprudence subscribed to this position.

## SCHOLASTIC DEVELOPMENT RELATED TO THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ALLAH AND HIS CREATIONS

As we described earlier, Sufis in their quest for developing their abilities go for training in different stages. The first such stage is called *fana*, where a feeling of nothingness, save Allah, is practised. Everything else including the world around and the self goes into oblivion and union with Allah is contemplated. This *fana* and union stage is followed by the feeling of *baqa*, whereby the *salik* (Practitioner of Sufism) comes out of the *fana* and union stance and develops the vision of existence of Allah separate from everything else. So, everything else, actually creations of Allah, exists simply as Allah wills and they are not of much importance. The role of a *salik* is that of a servant of Allah, and nothing else matters, including self-interest and self-actualisation. Allah is all important and worthy and the 'others', including the person himself, is His subject (*abd*) and has little or no value as compared to Allah.

Some Sufis have described these experiments in words. They use different terms for their ideas. Obviously, words and expressions selected for describing such metaphysical feelings and visions and transcendental issues are not meant for public consumption. Persons with particular taste and ability can comprehend them properly, and the scope of different interpretations of meanings cannot be ruled out altogether. Further, the description of different stages of experiments by the same person may (rather it does) contrast with each other. However, such academic points are useful for scholastic development. Knowledge widens and one becomes wiser in the process.

## WAHDATUL WAJOOD AND WAHDATUL SHAHOOD

One such word used by Shaykh Mohyuddin ibn-Arabi (d. 638/1240) is *wahdatul wajood*, which literally means unity of existence. It became popular and caused much debate and discussion. Unfortunately, this expression was picked up by scholars, writers and orators of different tastes and abilities and then it came into public domain. Its literal meaning made it akin to the concept that no creation exists as such and everything which one sees around is an illusion. And if they exist, everything will ultimately merge into the existence of Allah. Obviously, this goes contrary to concept of Allah in Islam where He is separate from His creations. This expression became a subject of loose talk and was used as a weapon in the hands of persons with dubious intentions, which was particularly evident in India in the palace of the Mughal King Akbar. They are referred to as *wajoodis*. A number of such *wajoodis* were able to reach the palace of Akbar and vitiate the atmosphere with regard to the basic articles of faith concerning Islam. This was noted by a young scholar, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1634). He first tried to engage in debates with such persons, but this was of no avail because of the support of the King to such unsavoury and

ambiguous elements. He was alarmed because the confusion created in the palace was bound to permeate in the whole country. He later settled at Sirhind in Punjab, formulated another doctrine and started training a number of scholars in his *tariqah* (methodology) of Sufism. [He was himself trained in Naqshbandi methodology]. It became a movement so much so that the confusion created in the place of Akbar and its impact on society was resolved to a great extent by the time of next Mughal rulers, within the life-span of Shaykh Sirhindi itself. Shaykh Sirhindi named his new doctrine as *wahdatul shabood*. Obviously, it was intended to refute the doctrine of *wahdatul wajood*. Later, certain scholars, particularly Shah Waliullah (d. 1176/1762) of Delhi, attempted to 'accommodate some transcendental insights of Sirhindi in the *wajoodi* framework.' They argued that the differences between the two doctrines were 'mere a matter of language than substance.' In other words, these were endeavours to reconcile the two theories. It is obvious that there may not be much problem in the *wahdatul wajood* theory itself. However, its use by the so-called camp-followers created all the problems.

Instead of deliberating on the two doctrines, *wahdatul wajood* and *wahdatul shabood*, we are providing here a translation of a lecture on the subject by a practicing sufi scholar of our times, Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan (died 7 December 2017 in Rawalpindi). He was an Islamic scholar and spiritual leader of the Naqshbandia Owaisiah order of Sufism. Here is a translation of his reply given in a question-answer session during one of his training sessions for his followers. The short video clip (of 18 minutes) containing this reply may be accessed through a link provided at the end of the translation. This is a free-hand translation because it was very difficult to do literal word-by-word translation of the deliberation by a master of the subject who described complex issues in simple language for public consumption. Describing difficult subjects in a simple and easy-to-understand manner needs a high level of expertise, a quality that Ameer Muhammad Akram Awan (may Allah bestow His Mercy on him) surely had. The translation follows:

"As we are aware, knowledge of anything acquired through normal methods is achieved in stages. One has to acquire knowledge of one chapter and then go to another chapter in the pursuit of knowledge of any subject. The same is the case with sufis acquiring mystic knowledge. They pass through various stages and come across many experiences in their pursuit. While doing meditation relating to *fana* they feel that everything is vanishing and nothing exists, including they themselves, the things around and the entire universe. Further, in meditations related to *baqa*, sufis become aware of the illuminations from the Almighty Allah on all things existing and experience that the real existence which is there with its own right is that of Allah while other things are existing because He has created them and so have no such existence by way of right or as their own. They are available in the form and shape and respective characteristic features that the Almighty Allah has made them to be and will cease to occur as such the moment He wills otherwise. So, nothing save Allah, the Lord, has any value or importance on its own. "Some sufis described their experience of *fana* as *wahdatul wajood* (all existence is one/monism of *wajood*/the unity of Being) meaning that there is only one worthy existence. The existence of anything has no value as they have no self-right to exist. There is no difference between their existence or non-existence as their worth is as good as nothing when it is compared to that of Allah. Shaykh Mohiuddin Ibn Arabi, a famous sufi, wrote in detail about this experiment in his treatise. And the expression of *wahdatul wajood* became popular after this, so much so that it became a doctrine of its own. A lot of discussions and treatise erupted from this. Obviously, this was an experience of such people as were almost perfect in their knowledge

and experiments in Sufism. But unfortunately, this discussion was also picked up by other persons who were not as much accomplished in their formal education and Sufism. The uncalled-for intrusion of this brand of less-informed and ill-experienced persons in the discourse became problematic. A simple expression of the fact that Allah alone is immortal, the First and the Last, and everything else is mortal, destined to perish as Allah wills, leads to a strange meaning that everything is Allah. This was an alien thought which has no basis in Islamic discourse.

“The problems created by the discourses of ignorant and inexperienced claimants of Sufism, who brought these academic discussions in public domain, were resolved for good by another great sufi, Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624), known as Mujaddid Alf-Thani (Revivalist of the millennium year), who propagated another parallel doctrine, in contrast to *wahdatul wajood*, which he named as *wahdatul shahood* (Unity of testimony/perception). This doctrine simply means that the other beings prove the Being of the Almighty Allah. The creations of The Creator are testimony to His existence. This doctrine resolved all kinds of confusion created by the literal meaning of the earlier doctrine of *wahdatul wajood*. Therefore, the uncalled-for difficulties and questions were settled by the nomenclature of the new doctrine. Mujaddid Alf-Thani made the position crystal-clear that every being that we see, know, feel and perceive around us in its relative positioning is created by Allah, the Supreme. So, the Creator and the creatures are separate beings and all created bodies testify to and affirm the existence of Allah.

“It should be kept in mind that doctrines as above are simply terminologies which describe different positions. They are not articles of faith. A doctrine, theory, or term coined to explain any idea need not be a faith as such. A faith is delineated for good by the Islamic Shari’ah. Terminologies are simply meant for articulating any idea and expression of any specific stance. And that is all. As a matter of principle, the basic faiths delineated in the Islamic Shari’ah hold good. All other explanations and descriptions should be within the scope permitted in the Shari’ah. If any explanation crosses the permitted range of the Shari’ah, it is not acceptable; rather it is void ab-initio.

“Academic discourses are welcome until they are within limits. For example, in the case of different *tafaseer* (exegesis) of the Qur’an done by various scholars, we stand to gain from them and it leads to the expansion of knowledge. However, no explanation beyond the primary intent of the text of the Qur’an is acceptable. Academic exercises are welcome and useful provided they are within certain boundaries. The same is the case of explanations and discussions based on the traditions of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) where the boundary within which its meaning can be stretched is the intention of the Prophet which is defined by the way his companions (may Allah be pleased with them) understood and practised and as confirmed by the Prophet himself. If any discourse goes beyond this, that is false (*batil*). The same is true about the sayings and deeds of sufis. Nothing beyond the demarcation lines drawn by the Islamic Shari’ah can be the truth.

“Sufis are committed in following the Prophet and are engrossed therein. They are totally absorbed therein and at times they experience spiritual and inner consciousness and are recipients of knowledge through vision, inspiration or dream (*kashf* and *ilham*). Prophets also get experience, besides direct revelations from Allah (*wahy*), in the form of *kashf*, *ilham* and dreams. However, despite the similarity in such experiences, there are important and



very basic differences between the two in their nature and, consequently, in their implications.

- “Sufis have no access to direct revelations (*wahy*) from Allah, as it is the exclusive domain of Prophets.
- “The experiences of Sufis are subject to confirmation of the teachings of prophets and anything contrary is not acceptable. The possibility of misinterpretation of the experience or intrusion of shaitan in the process cannot be ruled out in totality, while it is ruled out in the case of prophets. The *kashf*, *ilham* and dreams of prophets are true and so are at par with their revelations (*wahy*).
- “The *kashf*, *ilham* and dreams of prophets are binding on their followers (ummah) while it is not so in the case of the sufis. A sufi himself may be bound to follow his vision received from these sources, provided the same is not in contradiction to any teaching of the Islamic Shari’ah. Further, such a vision of anybody other than prophets may not have any relevance for persons other than the recipient.
- “*Kashf*, *ilham* and dreams of sufis may serve as explanations or understandings of any aspect of Islamic Shari’ah. However, nothing can be added or deleted based on these experiences, as they are not any source of law in Islam.”

[Link- <https://youtu.be/62JEdsn1lu8>]

#### HOW THE QUR’AN DESCRIBES ALLAH?

The Holy Qur’an is full of descriptions of Allah. However, we have chosen verses from five places to give an idea of how Allah is introduced in the Qur’an.

- (1) There is nothing like Him. [The Qur’an 42:11]
- (2) Say, He is Allah, The One and Only; Allah, the Eternal Absolute; He begets not, nor was He begotten; And there is none like unto Him. [The Qur’an 112]
- (3) He is the First and the Last, The Evident and the Hidden; and He has full knowledge of all things. [The Qur’an 57:3]
- (4) He is Allah: there is no Allah but He; the Knower of the unseen and the manifest, He is the Most Merciful, the Most Compassionate. He is Allah: there is no Allah but He: The King, The Holy, the All-Peace, the Giver of security, the Overseer, the Most Mighty, the Overpowering, the All-Great. Exalted be He from whatever they associate with Him. He is Allah, the Planner, Executer and Fashioner of creation. His are the names most beautiful. Whatever is in the heavens and the earth extols His Glory. He is the Most Mighty, the Most Wise. [The Qur’an 59:22-24]
- (5) Allah! There is no Allah ‘worthy of worship’ except Him, the Ever-Living, All-Sustaining. Neither drowsiness nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on the earth. Who could possibly intercede with Him without His permission? He fully knows what is ahead of them and what is behind them, but no one can grasp any of His knowledge—except what He wills to reveal. His Seat encompasses the heavens and the earth, and the preservation of both does not tire Him. For He is the Most High, the Greatest. [The Qur’an 2:255]

The Qur’an says that there is nothing like Allah (42:11). Obviously, it is not possible to describe Him in words that can be understood by anybody. However, one full chapter of the Qur’an (Chapter 112) comprising four verses introduces the person of Allah saying that He is unique,

Who was neither begotten nor He begets and all are dependent on Him while He is dependent on none. In fact, it is the only place in the Book where the persona of Allah has been stated. On all other places the Qur'an presents His attributes. Translation of verses from three such places have been noted above to give an idea about how attributes of Allah are delineated in the Book.

## RELATED ISSUES IN THE QUR'AN AND SUNNAT

Islam vies for perfection of man. It aims at perfecting all aspects of man's life, be it matter, mind or spirit. No concept of dichotomy between matter and spirit, which is generally considered in the name of spirituality, is encouraged in Islam. Prophets, the perfect examples of men, showed the way for development of all aspects of man's features. No lop-sided development is envisaged. Man should remain a man, what he has been created. The Qur'an and the prophetic traditions (sunnat) call the best men as *abd* (servant) of Allah who are required to do *ibadah* (the service for which Allah has created him) so that he may rise in his *Ubudiyah* (servanthood to Allah). Allah in the Qur'an uses expressions like *ibadi* (my servant), *ibadur-rahman* (servant of the merciful Allah) and *ibadullah* (servant of Allah) for the best of men, including prophets. The same is true about Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) who is described as *abdulhu warasooluhu* (Allah's servant and His Prophet). That is why the life that man will enjoy hereafter in Paradise will be a life of both spirit and matter.

Islam teaches that there is no object of worship (*ilah*) except Allah and man is His servant (*abd*) who has been created to serve Him. The quality of a man is directly proportional to his servanthood; higher his service, higher his position. There is no stage for man higher than *Ubudiyah*. The methodology, rather the modus operandi, of fulfilling the requirements of *Ubudiyah* is to take care of all the relationships with which man is born. He has a relationship with his Lord and Creator followed by relationship with his self, comprising his body, mind and spirit. Further, he has interactions with fellow human beings and with other creatures. All these interactions entail basic obligations and preferable behaviours.

In all such relationships a person is required to act in specific manners. There are things that are obligatory while others are forbidden. Other acts are commendable while some others are in the permitted category. A common man would suffice by meeting the demands of obligations and keeping forbidden affairs at bay. He may not go for commended actions and at times may take the advantage of, rather indulge in, matters which are permitted. That much would suffice for him and he will, in sha Allah (Allah willing), be successful in his accountability before Allah on the day of judgement. However, a person of higher level in his *ubudiyah*, while abiding by the requirements of obligatory and forbidden matters, would also practice commended affairs and avoid everything doubtful, although legally and technically permitted. He would be, in sha Allah (Allah willing), entitled to a higher place before Allah, the Lord, and would get befitting additional rewards hereafter.

Dr Abdul Haq Ansari (may Allah bestow His Mercy on him), a great author on the subject of Sufism in the English language, has delineated the path shown by Islam for human perfection and described the characters of companions of the Prophet in this regard.

“The Qur'an and Sunnat have shown in great detail how one is to perform service (*ibadah*): How to strengthen faith and attain conviction; how to adore and worship Allah; how to remember Him, love Him, seek His help, and beg for His protection; how to get rid of evil habits and cultivate virtue; how to perform things that are obligatory, avoid those that are forbidden, pursue those that are commended, and deal with those that are permitted....

“The men that the Prophet raised, particularly the ones who worked with him for long, were the most perfect servants of Allah on earth, and the best embodiments of the values

he expounded. They were at one and the same time great devotees, preachers, soldiers, social workers and public servants. During a part of the night, they occupied themselves with Allah in prayer and supplication, and during the day they worked for their family, people and religion. They lived a simple life, enjoyed the goods of the world without indulging in them when they had it, and spent from them in the way of Allah when it was needed. Although they lived a full and balanced life, like the Prophet, they did have their individual thrusts. Some gave themselves to prayer and fasting, some to the exposition of the Qur'an or the teaching of the Hadith. Some distinguished themselves as preachers, some as social workers. Some excelled as commanders of armies, others as governors and rulers. Some were poor and lived as ascetics, others were rich, and spent their money on the needy in society and in the cause of religion. They believed that after fulfilling the duties, personal and collective, there were different ways, according to one's talent and circumstances and the needs of society to serve Allah, seek His pleasure (*radha*) and attain His near-ness (*qurb*)....The *qurb* or intimate relation with Allah that they enjoyed was the highest *qurb*, the Ummah believes, one can achieve." [Ansari, Abdul Haq (2015), p. 4-6]

#### RELATIONSHIP OF MAN WITH ALLAH

The Qur'an and Prophetic traditions (hadees/sunnat) use the word *qurb* to describe the desired relationship of man with Allah. It means closeness, contact and intimate relationship with Him. Allah is always available for a person to come in contact with Him without the need for an intermediary. The moment a person reaches Him out, He responds. It is man who forgets this grand facility. Man remains engrossed in other things unmindful of the opportunity to call his Lord. Allah has made this announcement very explicitly; "(O Muhammad), when My servants ask you about Me, tell them I am quite near; I hear and answer the call of the caller whenever he calls Me. Let them listen to My call and believe in Me; perhaps they will be guided right." (The Qur'an 2:186). In other words, every person who believes in Allah and is mindful of his duties towards the call of the Lord is free to call Him and get a positive response. Obviously, the level of dutifulness towards the faith in Allah is not equal for all men. This would depend on their respective *qurb* to Allah. The Qur'an uses various words to describe the degree of *qurb*. These are stages of the depth of relationship of man with Allah and hence it signifies the quality of perfectness of man. Three such words used by the Qur'an are *Khashi'at*, *Taqwa* and *Ihsan*.

**KHASHI'AT:** It refers to the awe and concern felt in the presence of any great person. The consciousness that Allah is watching leads to a feeling of seriousness and accountability and the person becomes mindful of whatever he is doing. Literally, this means fear but it is not the dread of an enemy or unseen event but the apprehension owing to the relationship with Allah. That is why the Qur'an uses expressions like *kash'iah-rabbah* (fear of the Lord) and *khashi'h-tur-rahman* (fear of the Compassionate) and says that only knowledgeable/learned servants of Allah fear (stand in awe of) Him [The Qur'an 35:28]. Higher this awareness of the presence of Allah, higher will be the quality of behaviour and actions of a man, resulting in better depth in relationship (*qurb*) with Him. This awareness of the Ever-Seeing, Ever-Hearing and Ever-Watching Lord leads to the second level of this relationship which is called *taqwa*.

**TAQWA:** Literally, it means carefulness, keeping harmful things at bay, forbearance, abstinence and protection. It translates into action in the form of Allah consciousness, fear and love of Allah,



and self-restraint. In other words, it is a high state of feeling, which keeps one conscious of Allah's presence. It results in responsible behaviour in view of the consequences of any action. A person possessing *taqwa* always considers the outcome of any deed, whether it would please or displease Allah, and would keep away from anything that is not approved of by the Lord. An apt definition of *taqwa* was given by Ubayy ibn Ka'ab, a young companion of the Prophet, who was asked by Umar bin al-Khattab, the Caliph, as to what is *taqwa*. [May Allah be pleased with both of them].

He replied, "Have you ever walked on a path that has thorns on it?"

Umar said, "Yes."

Ubayy asked, "What did you do then?"

Umar replied, "I rolled up my sleeves and proceeded."

Ubayy said, "That is *taqwa*, to protect oneself from sin through life's dangerous journey so that one can successfully complete the journey unscathed by sin."

Another, rather the highest, level of relationship with Allah (*qurb*), which basically emanates from Allah-consciousness, is *ihsan*.

**IHSAN:** It means to do things beautifully, in a perfect manner to achieve excellence. This Arabic term was defined by the Prophet in a very popular tradition known as Hadees of Jibril (Gabriel), when the angel came in human form and asked some basic questions of faith and the Prophet replied. The angel was not recognised by the companions of the Prophet who were present at that time. The Prophet informed them after the angel left that he had come to teach them. One of the questions was what is *Ihsan* to which the Prophet replied, "To worship Allah as though you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then indeed He sees you."

The excellence in deeds is accomplished by doing more than what is required in *taqwa*. For example, in any transaction with another person, both parties are required to perform their part judiciously. This would be *taqwa*. However, if one party does better than what he was required to do, it is a case of *ihsan*. We can take the case of a transaction involving deferred payment for a week. If the debtor pays the amount on the specific date, he has performed his role properly. However, if he pays early and pays more, it would be a beautiful action, that is *ihsan*. Further in this example, if the debtor is not in a position to pay back in time, the creditor provides him extended period or takes less amount, it would be an act of *ihsan*. The same is the case of performing more prayer than the obligatory part, or doing charity with the sole aim of pleasing Allah, and so on. *Ihsan* may be understood as "*Taqwa* Plus", which implies going a step ahead than meeting the requirement of accountability before Allah. It is thankfulness. If *taqwa* is to avoid the displeasure of Allah, *ihsan* implies pleasing Him. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) was asked as to why he undertook extraordinary hardships in prayers, despite the fact that Allah had announced His pleasure with him, he replied, "Should I not be thankful to Allah?" It may be noted that many learned persons have expressed the opinion that Sufism is simply a name for *ihsan*. Both imply the same thing of highest possible *qurb* (nearness and relationship) with Allah.

## ROOHLANLAT (SPIRITUALISM) IN ISLAM

The importance of this discussion is that the expression spiritualism is not found, as such, in the primary source of Islam. New nomenclature is not an issue in the development of any kind of knowledge. However, it would be pertinent to locate the available basis in the original sources for the underlying concepts.

The Qur'an says that everything has been created by Allah. He commands anything to happen and that thing comes into being. "He is the Originator of the heavens and the earth; whenever He decrees something He (merely) says: 'Be', and it comes to be." [The Qur'an 2:117]. Obviously, *rooh* (spirit) is part of the creations of Allah. This has been further clarified. "And they ask you about the Spirit. Say, 'The Spirit is of the Command of my Lord. '" [The Qur'an 17:85]. The Qur'an further informs that all the future generations of Adam were created at a time and made to testify that Allah is their Lord. "And recall (O' Prophet) when your Lord brought forth descendants from the loins of the sons of Adam, and made them witnesses concerning themselves, asking them: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said: 'Yes, we do testify.'" [The Qur'an 9:172]. Hence it is ingrained in the nature of every spirit entering the body of a baby in the womb of its mother that it is a servant of the Lord, Allah. This is called *fitrah* (the Nature), the puritan stage of the *rooh* (spirit). This *fitrah* may be translated as Islam which implies submission to Allah. Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) said that every person is born on this nature. Abu Huraira (may Allah be pleased with him) reported Allah's Messenger as saying: The mother of every person gives him birth according to his true nature. It is subsequently his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian. Had his parents been Muslim he would have also remained a Muslim. [Sahih Muslim 2659]

The Islamic concept is that the spirit entering into a body is in the pure stage whereas the conditions after the birth -- parenting, atmosphere, education, social interactions, and other trials and tribulations of life -- affect this pure stage. The ideal condition is that man should endeavour to cleanse the spirit of all other impacts which are not in consonance with its original pure condition, so that when death comes, that is when the spirit moves on from this body, it is as near as possible to its original uncontaminated condition. This is the highest ideal of spiritualism which may be called THE SPIRIT SHOULD BE AS PURE AT DEATH AS IT WAS ON BIRTH.

#### HOW TO CLEANSE THE SPIRIT?

One method adopted by many for keeping the spirit pure is to shun all the requirements of life to the extent possible. This is called monasticism (*rahbaniyat*), wherein all contact with human beings, including parents, children, spouses and other relations, are abrogated and the person goes to live in places where he is alone so that he may perform his prayers secluded and without any distraction. The idea is to avoid all forms of indulgence. Islam does not favour this. The Prophet is reported to have said that there is no *rahbaniyat* in Islam. [لَا رَهْبَانِيَّةَ فِي الْإِسْلَامِ]. Abu Umama al Bahli (may Allah be pleased with him), a companion of the Prophet, reported that once they were proceeding on a mission with the Prophet and came across a place with a cave and waterfall. One of them sought permission from the Prophet to stay there and pray to Allah till his death. The Prophet declined and said that he had not come to teach such seclusion from life as practised in Christianity and Judaism.

The Qur'an has commented on such practices of the followers of Jesus, the son of Mary [Isa ibn Maryam (may peace and blessings of Allah be to them)], as their innovation which was not prescribed. "And We placed in the hearts of those who followed (Jesus, the son of Mary) compassion and mercy and monasticism, which they innovated; We did not prescribe it for them except [that they did so] seeking the pleasure of Allah. But they did not observe it with due observance." [The Qur'an 57:27].

The Qur'an, on the other hand, presents the most pious and likeable persons in the eyes of Allah those who remain engaged in the requirements of life on earth without losing their sight from the obligations towards the Lord and their fellow human beings. "Men who are not distracted,

either by commerce or profit, from remembering Allah, keeping up the prayer, and paying zakah (the prescribed alms), fearing a day when hearts and eyes will turn over.” [The Qur’an 24:37] Obviously, it is a more challenging job to live a normal life and maintain self-discipline and austerity. The life of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him) and his companions (may Allah be pleased with all of them) is a testimony of this approach. They lived, traded, married, fought battles and indulged in all aspects of life permitted by Allah. However, their piety and prayers are of the highest order possible for any human being and human society to achieve. This is the perfection of man which Islam vies for. The verse of the Qur’an quoted above prescribes two tasks: remembering Allah and paying zakah. These symbolise two aspects of the required behaviour: duties towards Allah (*huququllah*) and duties towards fellow human beings (*huququlibad*).

We intend to study the life and deeds of some prominent Sufis with special focus on these aspects of life: Prayer and Service. This study is required to dispel popular confusions about their life that they led a life away from society. In fact, stories of their seclusion are mostly related to their initial and training periods. Finally, they lived in society and served it in an exemplary manner. Their greatness lies in this total personality, as embodiments of the true teachings of Islam.

## LIVES AND DEEDS OF SOME PROMINENT SUFIS

It is quite impossible to 'select' names of prominent Sufis. A number of them lived and worked for a better society in almost all parts of the globe. Scores of books are available on their lives and deeds. Suffice it to say that we will be focusing on three such personalities whose authentic records are available and who have left an indelible imprint on society.

SHAYKH ABDUL QADIR JILANI (May Allah bestow His Mercy on him)

Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani was born on March 23, 1078 CE (1 Ramadan, 470 AH), in Jilan, Iran. He died on February 21, 1166 CE (11 Rabi' al-Thani, 561 AH), at the age of 87 years in Baghdad, Iraq. The family lineage of his father, Abu Saleh, goes to Hasan ibn Ali, grandson of the Prophet, while that of his mother, Ummul Khair Fatima, goes to Hussain ibn Ali, another grandson of the Prophet. (May Allah be pleased with all of them). He was admitted to a local madrasa and studied in his home town till the age of 18 and thereafter was sent to Baghdad by his mother, who had become her full guardian after the early demise of his father and then his grandfather.

A famous story is that his mother had given him 40 dinars and sewed the same under the arms of his coat. One of her parting instructions were speak the truth always. He was part of a caravan, headed for Baghdad, when it was attacked by dacoits. On their enquiry about any wealth with him, he informed them about the dinar sewed in his coat. They were astonished at the fair character of this boy, who told them that he had promised his mother never to tell a lie. This truthfulness led to repentance by the dacoits. One may say that this was the beginning of the pious life of young Abdul Qadir Jilani, and afterwards lakhs of people repented by holding his hands.

His days of higher learning in Baghdad were full of trials and tribulations owing to the dearth of resources. He remained steadfast and completed his formal education in all the subjects taught there. He pursued the study of Hanbali law under Abu Saeed Mubarak Makhzoomi and ibn Aqil. He studied Hadith with Abu Muhammad Ja'far al-Sarraj. His sufi spiritual instructor was Abu'l-Khair Hammad ibn Muslim al-Dabbas. (May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them). They were the best teachers of their respective subjects at that time and thus Jilani acquired a high learning of subjects like *Fiqh* (Jurisprudence), *Tafsir* (Commentary of the Holy Qur'an), Sunnat of the Holy Prophet, Hadees (Traditions of the Holy Prophet) and Arab Literature. He became erudite in all the subjects taught under the Madrasa Nizamiya system of education. He also became engrossed in sufi spiritual issues and left Baghdad after completing his formal studies and wandered in deserts and visited different places for 25 years and came back thereafter.

After this reappearance in Bagdad, he joined the Madrasa where he had studied as a faculty member. His teacher, Al-Makhzoomi, later appointed him as his successor and Jilani became the Principal of the School of Hanbalite Law (Madrassa Babul Ajaz), a post which he had held for over 30 years. He taught Hadees and *Tafsir* and commenced preaching the faith and practices. His popularity as a preacher, asking people to repent and lead a pious life, was so high that people at large flocked to him. He started giving such lectures thrice a week -- on Wednesday evenings, Fridays and Sunday mornings. Initially, his lectures were held in the existing building of the Madrasa itself, but the number of participants grew and a new building for the Madrasa was purchased for its extension. That too became insufficient and then his lectures commenced in the open space. At times, the audience would have several thousands in number. Forty people were formally assigned the task to prepare notes on these lectures. Besides this, many other people

would also prepare such notes. It is reported that on the days of his lecture, wells in the area would dry up because of the amount of water taken out by such writers to prepare their ink for writing. It may be noted that the mother tongue of Jilani was Persian, not Arabic. However, his eloquence in Arabic was par excellence and its impact on the audience was such that they would weep and cry, and atone. They would decide to lead pious lives. Obviously, it was not the mere eloquence or knowledge of the subject that had such an impact on others, it was the sincerity and piousness and the God-loving persona of the teacher that was behind this.

He used to speak in a harsh language, speaking directly against the wrong practices of the people. Once when he was asked not to be so stern, he replied that he eats hard food and speaks hard language. He opined that as the level of dirt of worldly wrong practices had become high and it had to be erased in a similarly strong manner; one needs to rub hard to wash high-sticking earth. He was sure that his punitive language would not deter people; rather they would be benefited. And he was right in this. His popularity grew day by day.

It is reported that on various occasions, even non-Muslims would come to listen to his lectures. After listening to his lectures, they would find that they could not refute anything he said and they would willingly accept Islam. 'It was a training school for the young, a place to repent for the sinful, a place of guidance for the misguided, and a bank of spiritualism for the spiritually bankrupt.'

Another remarkable aspect of his lecture was that he would not spare the wrong-doings of people attached with the palace and government officials, He would address point-blank in the public and demand them to correct their manners. He was fearless, not bothering about any worldly powers. The men in the power gallery loved him also because they were afraid to challenge him in view of his popularity among the masses. One incident is enough to show how effective he was in getting wrongs undone. Once the caliph of that time appointed someone popular as a cruel person as the judge (*qazı*) of Baghdad. Jilani decried this appointment publicly. He said, "You have appointed a cruel person as an officer of public affairs. How will you face on the day of judgement, tomorrow, the Lord of the Worlds, who is most Compassionate and Loving?" The caliph cancelled the appointment immediately.

In addition to these sermons for public consumption, he continued his academic activities. He would teach every day in the morning and afternoon the lessons in the Qur'an *Tafsir*, Hadees, principles of Islamic law and other allied subjects. His routine was to issue *fatwa* (religious legal opinion) after Zohar (mid-day) prayer on queries from the public and scholars. Such queries would come from all walks of life and from all parts of the world. Here too he had a distinction. He was heading a Hambli school of jurisprudence and was himself an authority on that. Further, he also had authoritative command on other schools of jurisprudence, particularly the Shafaii school. He would issue the fatwas based on any of such schools, particularly Hambli and Shafaii approaches. Such openness and academic integrity are the rarest of rare kind. Other scholars, especially Imam Nuwawi, has noted and praised this greatness.

It is reported that he distributed food among the poor every evening. Before taking his own dinner after Maghrib (day-break) prayer, he would ensure that nobody in the vicinity was hungry and announced that anyone who had no food should come to him. He would take his own food only after that.

He remained unmarried till the age of 50. He perhaps considered marriage as an impediment in the way of his spiritual growth. Then realisation grew in him that he was not following the way (sunnat) of the Prophet in this matter. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) has said, "*Nikah* (marriage) is my way." According to another hadith, he said, "Whoever had

no attachment with my way is not with me.” This realisation of failing to follow the traditions of the Prophet grew, and at the age of 51 years, Jilani married four women: Sayyida Bibi Madina, Sayyida Bibi Sadiqa, Sayyida Bibi Mu'minah, and Sayyida Bibi Mahboobah. Once a person asked him about this. He replied, “I would not have married but my beloved forefather, Nabi Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) has commanded me to marry. It is on this basis that I have made *Nikah*. I was, in reality, afraid of making *Nikah*, for the reason that my time may be lost in other things rather than in the love of my Creator, but when the time came, then My Creator blessed me with four wives, and each one of them loved me dearly.” He had 49 children -- 27 sons and 22 daughters -- from these wives. Many of his children became beacons of the light that he himself was spreading.

A noteworthy feature of his sermons is that he never delved on philosophical issues. He talked in the common man's language for general consumption. He kept a clear line of demarcation of academic issues relegated to academic classes in the Madrasa and common issues for the public at large. This is one of the reasons for his popularity and success in his mission. He always started his lecture with the Qur'anic verse. “And say, 'The truth has come, and falsehood vanished. Undoubtedly the falsehood was certain to vanish.’ [Qur'an 17:81].

His lectures were noted by several people and through this way his teachings spread far and wide. Many collections of his lectures are available in different languages. One such authentic source is the one compiled by his son, Isa Abdur Rahman, in a book form titled *Futuh al-Ghaib* (The Revelations of the Unseen), containing 80 discourses. Its English translation is also available. The following excerpts from three of these discourses -- two initial and one last discourse -- are meant to give an idea of the content and style of his message.

#### THE FIRST DISCOURSE

Three things are indispensable for a believer in all conditions of life: 1. He should keep the commandments of God; 2. He should abstain from the forbidden things; and 3. He should be pleased with the decree of Providence. Thus, the least that is expected of a believer is that he should not be without these three things. So, he should make up his mind for these and talk to himself about them and keep his organs engaged in them.

#### THE SECOND DISCOURSE

Follow faithfully (in the footsteps of the Holy Prophet) and do not create innovation and remain obedient (to God and His Prophet) and do not transgress. Uphold the Oneness of God and do not ascribe any partner to Him; and conceive Him in His Holiness and do not ascribe any evil to Him. Maintain His truth and do not give way to double-standards; and remain patient and do not run away; and apply to Him for your needs, do not feel annoyed but wait; and be united in obedience and do not be disunited. Love one another and do not bear spite towards one another; and keep free from vices and do not be contaminated or defiled by them; and beautify yourselves with obedience to your Lord; and do not remain away from the doors of your Master; and do not refrain from being attentive to Him; and do not delay your repentance and return to Him; and do not feel weary of making petition to your Creator at any time during the day and the night. (If you do so) may be mercy will be shown to you and you will have good luck and be kept away from hell-fire, and be given a happy life in paradise and be united with God and enjoy the blessings of God together with the company of virgins in the Abode of Peace and in that state abide forever; and you may ride good horses and you may be happy with white-eyed *Hurs* and various kinds of



scents and melodies of female slaves together with those other blessings; and you may be exalted in the company of the prophets and *siddiqs* (perfected men of truth) and *shahids* (that is, dedicated witnesses to the cause of truth) and *salibs* (that is, ordinary men of piety who are free from glaring sins) in the high heaven. [Abu Abdur Rahman, pp. 26, 27]

#### THE LAST DISCOURSE, THE EIGHTIETH ONE

[Is Based On The Description Of The Final Hours Of The Great Man]

He (may God be pleased with him) said: "Between you and me and the creation, there is only He; as also between the heaven and the earth. So, do not judge me by anyone of them and do not judge anyone of them by me." Then his son Abdul Aziz asked him about his pain and about his condition. He said: "Let not anyone ask me about anything. I am being turned over and over again in the knowledge of God." It is further reported that his son, Abdul Aziz, asked him about his disease. On this he said: "Surely no one, neither any man nor any jinn, nor any angel knows or understands my disease. The knowledge of God is not diminished by the command of God. The command changes but the knowledge does not change. The command may be abrogated but not knowledge. God causes to pass away and establishes what He pleases, and with Him is the basis of the Book: And He cannot be questioned as to what He does, and they will be questioned (21:23). The attributes will move on as it is again narrated. His son Abdul Jabbar asked him: "What part of your body is ailing?" He said: "All the parts of my body are ailing except my heart which has no pain in it and is sound with God."

Then death came to him as he was saying: "I seek the help of God with the formula: There is no object of worship except God, glory be to Him and be He exalted, the Everlasting, Who does not fear annihilation; glory be to Him Who has established His superiority through His power and overpowered His servants by means of death. There is no object of worship except God and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah".

I have been told by his son, Musa, that he was uttering the word *TA'AZZAZA* (Lord! You have honoured me) and his tongue was unable to utter it correctly, so he went on repeating it till he uttered this word *TA'AZZAZA* and prolonged the sound and stressed it so that he uttered it correctly at last. Then he said: "Allah, Allah, Allah," then his honoured soul left his body -- the pleasure of God be on him. May He allow His blessings on benefit us and grant us a good end without abasing us and putting us in trial and may He thus enable us to join the men of piety. Amen! Amen! Amen! [*ibid* pp.178, 179]

KWAJA MUHAMMAD NIZAMUDDIN AULIA (May Allah bestow His Mercy on him)

His name was Muhammad, but he became more popular as Nizamuddin. Later he acquired Khwaja as an honorific and had Aulia also added to his name. Now, he is referred to as Khwaja Nizamuddin Aulia. He was born in 639 H at Badaun in Uttar Pradesh and died in 725 H at Basti Hazrat Nizamuddin, Delhi. The paternal and maternal sides of his family had arrived in Lahore from Bukhara and had later shifted to Badaun. His father died when he was just five. His mother took charge of his upbringing and education. He shifted with his mother and sister to Delhi at the age of 16 years for higher education because the available opportunities in Badaun for the purpose were fully utilised and explored by then. His mother died in Delhi.

Shaykh Nizamuddin did not marry and adopted his nephew for guardianship.

He continued his formal education from different scholars and got the certificate for learning and teaching in Hadith. But he was not satisfied with formal education and his heart was yearning for something more. He heard about Shaykh Fariduddin (Baba Farid Ganj-e-Shakar) – May Allah bestow His Mercy on him - and went to meet him in Ajodhan, (Pakpattan, now in Pakistan) and became his pupil. He intended to stay with him and do away with formal education. But his spiritual guide instructed him to continue and complete his ongoing educational activities. He came back to Delhi and frequented several times to Ajodhan. Finally, under the advice of his Shaykh, he made Delhi his place of abode for preaching.

His life in Delhi at the time of his education and in the initial days of his final arrival was full of hardships and he had to change his house several times. Finally, he settled in Ghyaspur, away from the walled city. These days that area is known as Basti Hazrat Nizamuddin and is well within New Delhi. As he started preaching and serving people, his popularity grew and he began a 'langer' programme, as presents and donations from different quarters poured in. His spiritual guide, Baba Farid, too, would organise 'langer' in Ajodhan. [In fact, the practice of 'langer' as started by Baba Farid became part of the culture of Punjab with the practitioners of Sikhism taking it to great heights.] What has come to be known as 'langer' is an arrangement for food for all and sundry. Anyone can come to the 'langer' and have food free of cost and without any obligation.

The popularity of Kwaja Nizamuddin Aulia in Delhi grew at a fast pace. He was admired, rather loved, by people belonging to all sections of society -- the rich, the poor, the young, the aged, the common man, government officials and persons belonging to the palace. The Shaykhs of Chisti Silsila of Sufism keep rulers at bay and avoid any meeting with them. Alauddin Khilji sought permission to meet Shaykh Nizamuddin, but the Shaykh refused, saying that he had no business in

the company of kings. The next king, Jalaluddin Khilji, too sought permission which was declined. He planned to visit the place of the Shaykh secretly as a common man. The Shaykh came to know about the plan and left his khanqah for a long tour of Ajodhan, the place where Baba Farid was buried. The next king, Qutbuddin Malik Shah, made it a prestige issue and commanded Shaykh Nizamuddin to come to the palace, warning that if he did not do so at the expiry of one month, he would be dragged and brought therein. Shaykh Nizamuddin did not budge and remained firm on his decision of not visiting the palace. On the last night, at the expiry of 30 days, the king was assassinated by one of his deputies.

However, Shaykh Nizamuddin went to the palace court at the time of Gheyasuddin Tughlaq. It was to defend the practice of *Mahfil-e-Sama* (Singing-Session) prevalent in his *khanqah* (monastery). Some religious scholars had filed a case in the court of the King against this practice saying that it was forbidden in Islam. The debate, allegations by the complainants and their reply by the Shaykh, continued for hours and finally the King ruled in favour of the practice.

*Mahfil-e-Sama* (Singing-Sessions) conducted in the *khanqah* of Shaykh Nizamuddin comprised singing of poems of love of Allah and His Prophet. These were sessions of vocal singing which were, at times, accompanied by drum and duff beating. It should not be confused with the qawwalis and, so called, sufi music prevalent these days. There was no question of any string or wind based musical instrument (which are referred to as *mazamir* in several hadith) which is not permitted in Islam. This issue of *mazamir* (wind/string-based instruments) was once raised in a majlis (discussion session) of the Shaykh. He categorically forbade this, saying that anything that was not permitted in Shari'ah (Islamic law) could not be practised. Someone argued that the

participants become so much engrossed in the content of the singing that they failed to decipher the presence or otherwise of such musical instruments. The Shaykh said that this was incorrect as such misplaced arguments could be given for all things forbidden by Allah. [Nadwi (2010), p. 119] It is pertinent to note what Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi, who wrote a magnificent series of books, *Tareekh-e-Dawat-o-Aẓeemat*, has said as the closing remarks in his writings on Shaykh Nizamuddin Aulia. It is a lamentation on how worthy things have gone astray with the passage of time.

“It is a sad story, but it should be told, that with the passage and evolution of time the quality of the Chishti order of Sufism witnessed marked deterioration as compared to the high-quality practices by its originators. The history of Sufism and spirituality is a testimony that every order started with strong and pious commitment and then it took the shape of a specific system and earmarked practices. The order has started with passionate love, care and intense attachment with Allah and His creations, self-sacrifices, austerity and self-acquired poverty, extreme hardships, service to humanity and propagation of truth. It deteriorated gradually and finally the following three traits became its characteristic features, as if these symbolised all the good things of the past:

1. Extremism in the faith of *wahdatul wajood* (Unity of Beings) and total commitment in its propagation with general discussions and discourses on its finer elements in public.
2. Abundance of *Mahfil-e-Samas* (singing sessions) and ecstatic and euphoric dances.
3. Arrangements for annual death anniversaries (*urs*) with practices which go beyond the limits of Islamic Shari’ah.

“The great personalities of Sufism had come from far off places in Iran, Turkistan and other regions to propagate the religion in its pristine purity and do away with faiths and practices which were in variant thereof. All these debased faiths and practices, which they tried to correct, became the order of the day for the khanqahs (cloister convents/monasteries) so much so that now non-Muslims are not able to decipher and understand the differences between Islam and other religions, for which these great men had arrived in the subcontinent. Where does the difference lie practically? The meaning of *Tauheed* (Unity of Allah) got limited to, rather lost in, the milieu of the meaning of *wahdatul wajood*. These great Sufis were steadfast in following in the footsteps (sunnat) of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) and were strict in following the commands of Shari’ah. Now these are taken as symbols of formal religion devoid of the true path. Shari’ah and *Tariqah* are considered not only as two different things but are also taken as if being in conflict with and contrast to each other. The instruments of music which these Shaykhs had strictly forbidden have become a part of *Tariqah*. Passionate feelings and love, the hallmark of the Chishti order, are hard to find now and have become rare so much so that a poet to say:

*Woh jo bechte the dawa-e-dil woh dukan apni barba gaye*

[Those who used to sell medicine for heart ailments have packed off  
and closed down their shop]

“Poverty (denial of worldly gains) was the ingrained quality of this order of Sufism. Now it stands replaced by wealth and indulgence in worldly gains.

“The greatest revolution of history was that the mission of the great personalities of Sufism was to bring all those who had been bending before and stooping to various objects and

power to bow before Allah, the Supreme. And they endeavoured to get the people's hearts detached from 'others' and attached to The Sole Creator and Benefactor. Their life and mission were in consonance with following verses of The Qur'an:

"It is not for a human [prophet] that Allah should give him the Scripture and authority and prophethood and then he would say to the people, 'Be servants to me rather than Allah', but [instead, he would say], 'Be pious scholars of the Lord because of what you have taught of the Scripture and because of what you have studied. Nor could he order you to take the angels and prophets as lords. Would he order you to disbelief after you had been Muslims?'" [The Qur'an 3:79-80]

"With the passage of time, these great personalities have themselves been sought and addressed to differently and their graves have become places of worship and prostration (sajda)." [ibid pp. 172-174]

MAKHDOOM SHARFUDDIN AHMAD YAHYA MANERI (May Allah bestow His Mercy on him)

Makhdoom Sharfuddin Ahmed was born on July 1264 A.D. (Sha'aban 661 A.H.) at Maner, a village near Patna, in Bihar. He died in 1381 A.D. (Shawwal, 782 Hijri) in Bihar Sharif. His father was Makhdoom Kamaluddin Yahya Maneri bin Israel bin Taj Faqeeh, a Sufi saint of Maner. His lineage from the paternal side goes to Zubair bin Abdul Muttalib, uncle of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be on him) and from the maternal side to Hussain bin Ali. (May Allah be pleased with all of them). His great grandfather had come from Al-Khaleel (Palestine) and the family had settled at Maner.

His traditional formal education commenced in Maner itself. However, at the age of 12 he accompanied his teacher Maulana Ashraf-uddin Abu Towama Bukhari who was passing through the area from Delhi to Sonargaon, near Dhaka. He spent more than two decades in Sonargaon and completed his formal education in Arabic, Persian and different aspects of religion. He married the daughter of his teacher there and came back to Maner with his son Zakiuddin. He left his son with his mother and proceeded to Delhi for completion of the 'purification of the soul' (*tazkiyatunnafs*) as he was not satisfied with the formal education he had by then. He was in search of a guide for the spiritual aspect of learning and experience. His elder brother, Shaykh Jaleeluddin, accompanied him and they met several Shaykhs in Delhi and Panipat, including Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia and Shaykh Boo Ali Qalandar, but was not satisfied with them. His search for a spiritual guide ended with Shaykh Najibuddin Firdausi. Thus, Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri became the torch-bearer of the Firdausi school of sufi *sisila* (order). The Firdausi order is a branch of Suhrawardi *sisilah*, introduced in India by Shaykh Badruddin Samarqandi (d.1315 A.D.), but reached its zenith under Shaykh Sharafuddin Yahya Maneri. (May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them).

He stayed for a few days with his spiritual guide who bade him farewell with a certificate and asked him not to come back even in the case of any bad news. The news of death of his master came while his caravan was on the way to its destination. This sad event and the yearning for spiritual experimentation engulfed him so much that he left his caravan and disappeared into forests near Bihia in the Ara area in Bihar. His elder brother and other caravan members could not trace him and they came back to Maner. Shaykh Sharafuddin Yahya Maneri dwelled in the forests for more than a decade and was finally located near Rajgir and Bihar Sharif. People from Bihar Sharif started

visiting him in the forest. He asked them not to come to the dreaded place and promised that he would himself come to their place every Friday. After a while he was convinced by the people and the government authorities to stay back in town and bid farewell the forest. Thus began the public life of the Shaykh, spanning more than half a century.

Besides popularity with the public at large, he had cordial relations with two empires of his time, that of Muhammad bin Tughluq (1325-1351 A.D.) and Firoz Shah Tughluq (1351-1388 A.D.). His letters to those rulers and some of the nobles are very significant in which he has exhorted them to render justice, help the destitute, develop love and affection for God and His creatures. Moreover, he emphatically warned the rulers not to follow in the footsteps of the tyrant rulers like Pharaoh, Shaddad, Namrud, et al. He wrote letters to the rulers and nobles recommending the cases of the oppressed in order to redress their grievances.

The distinctive feature of Shaykh Yahya Maneri was that he was well-versed in both formal and non-formal education. Every person belonging to any social stratum or religion was welcome in his informal discourses. He would not give any lecture as such, but would discuss issues raised by the participants and give answers to their questions. These informal meetings were immensely useful. He was able to speak the language of scholars and also of the common men with equal ease. He was at home with all. He served them and guided all and sundry.

One story related to his character would be enough about his public life. A man came to him with food items as presents. Although the Shaykh was fasting, he broke his fast to share the food with that man and said, "There is atonement (*kaffara*) for breaking fast but not for breaking a heart."

Many persons have compiled the discourses of such informal sittings which are known as *Malfoodbat* of Shaykh Yahya Maneri. He also wrote letters to his disciples discussing issues of religion and Sufism. They are called *Maktoobat* of the Shaykh. Such disciples compiled these letters which are authentic sources of his teachings. In fact, some of these *Maktoobat* are the best available textual material on Sufism and are taught in many *khanqahs* and seminaries as part of their curriculum.

## RELATED ISSUES AS STATED BY A RENOWNED SUFI

Many prominent Sufis wrote books on Sufism. Some wrote letters to their pupils which were later compiled and printed. In most of the cases the writings are meant for the consumption of scholars and practitioners of Sufism and their contents may not be easily understood by the common man. *Kashf Al-Mahjoob*, originally written in Persian by renowned sufi Hazrat Ali Bin Usman Hujwiri (May Allah bestow His Mercy on him), has the beauty of being easily understood without compromising on the quality of content. An expert like Hujwiri could only accomplish this daunting task. This book has been widely translated in many languages and is an authentic source, rather a classic, for understanding the issues related to Sufism, as explained by a practitioner himself. Reynold A. Nicholson, Professor of Persian and Arabic languages at the University of Cambridge, translated this book into English. The same English translation is widely referred to though other publishers of this work have come out with their own foreword/preface. We are referring to here one such publication.

### THE AUTHOR: ALI HUIJWIRI

Abul-Hasan Ali, b. Uthman b. Ali al-Ghaznawi al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, the author of *Kashf Al-Mahjub*, was a native of Ghazna in Afghanistan. Of his life, very little is known beyond what he relates incidentally in the book itself. He studied Sufism under Abul-Fadl Muhammad b. al-Hasan al-Khuttali, who was a pupil of Abul-Hasan al-Husri, and under Abul al Abbas Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Ashgani or al-Shagani. He also received instructions from Abu al-Qasim Gurgani and Khwaja Muzaffar, and a great number of Shaykhs whom he had met and conversed with in the course of his travels. (May Allah bestow His Mercy on all of them). He travelled far and wide through the Muslim empire from Syria to Turkistan and from the Indus to the Caspian Sea. Among the countries and places which he visited included Adharbayajan, and the tomb of Bayazid at Bistam, Damascus, Ramla, and Bayt al-Jinn in Syria, Tus and Uzkand, the tomb of Abu Said, b. Abul-Khayr at Mihna. Later he went to Iraq, where he had a brief married life which was not successful. He moved to Lahore and settled there. He preached Islam till his death and is one of the most important figures to have spread the faith in the Indian subcontinent. He wrote this book in Lahore and breathed his last there.

### THE BOOK: KASHF AL-MAHJUB

The book is the earliest complete work on Sufism in Persian. It not only provides definition of Sufism and related topics but also provides the ingrained and inner meaning of practices, refuting in clear terms wrong notions which had become popular. Ali Hujwiri has described, rather uncovered, twenty-five related issues. We are copying excerpts from four such chapters to give a brief concept of the subject-matter.

### EXCERPTS FROM THE BOOK

#### 1. CONCERNING SUFISM

“An eminent sufi says: “The combination of the light of the sun and the moon, when they are in conjunction, is like the purity of Love and Unification, when these are mingled together.” Assuredly, the light of the sun and the moon is worthless beside the light of the Love and



Unification of God Almighty, and they should not be compared; but in this world there is no light more conspicuous than these two luminaries. The eye cannot see the light of the sun and the moon with complete demonstration. During the sway of the sun and the moon it sees the sky, whereas the heart (*dil*) sees the empyrean (*arsh*) by the light of knowledge and unification and love, and while still in this world explores the world to come. All the Shaykhs of this path are agreed that when a man has escaped from the captivity of "stations" (*maqamat*), and gets rid of the impurity of "states" (*ahwal*), and is liberated from the abode of change and decay, and becomes endowed with all praiseworthy qualities, he is disjoined from all qualities. That is to say, he is not held in bondage by any praiseworthy quality of his own, nor does he regard it, nor is he made self-conceited thereby. His state is hidden from the perception of intelligence, and his time is exempt from the influence of thoughts. His presence with God has no end and his existence has no cause. And when he arrives at this degree, he becomes annihilated (*fani*) in this world and in the next, and is made divine (*rabbani*) in the disappearance of humanity; and gold and earth are the same in his eyes, and the ordinances which others find hard to keep become easy to him." [Nicholson (2001), p.104]

## 2. CONCERNING THE GNOSIS OF GOD (ma'rifat of Allah)

"Gnosis of God is of two kinds: 'cognitiveal (*Ilmi*) and emotional (*Aali*). Cognitiveal gnosis is the foundation of all blessings in this world and in the next, for the most important thing for a man at all times and in all circumstances is knowledge of God, as God hath said: "I only created the jinn and mankind that they might serve Me" (The Qur'an 51:56), i.e., they might know Me. But the greater part of men neglects this duty, except those whom God hath chosen and whose hearts He hath vivified with Himself. Gnosis is the life of the heart through God, and the turning away of one's inmost thoughts from all that is not God. The worth of everyone is in proportion to gnosis, and he who is without gnosis is worth nothing. Theologians, lawyers, and other classes of men give the name of gnosis (*marifah*) to right cognition of God, but the Sufi Shaykhs call right feeling towards God by that name. Hence, they have said that gnosis (*marifah*) is more excellent than cognition, for right feeling is the result of right cognition, but right cognition is not the same thing as right feeling, i.e. one who has not cognition of God is not Gnostic (*arif*), but one may have cognition of God without being a gnostic....

"Reason and the proofs adduced by reason are unable to direct anyone into the right way. If the infidels were to return from the place of Judgment to this world, they would bring their infidelity back with them (The Qur'an 6:28). When the Commander of the Faithful, Ali (May Allah be pleased with him), was asked concerning gnosis, he said: "I know God by God, and know that which is not God by the light of God." God created the body and committed its life to the spirit, and He created the soul and committed its life to Himself. Hence, in as much as reason and human faculties and evidences have no power to make the body live, they cannot make the soul live, as God hath said: "Shall he who was dead and whom We have restored to life and to whom We have given a light whereby he may walk among men" (The Qur'an 6:122), i.e., "I am the Creator of the light in which believers are illumined". It is God that opens and seals the hearts of men (The Qur'an 39:23): therefore, He alone is able to guide them. Everything except Him is a cause or a means, and causes and means cannot possibly indicate the right way without the favour of the Causer. He is that imposes the obligation of piety, which is essentially gnosis; and those on whom that obligation is laid, so long as they are in the state of obligation, neither bring it upon themselves nor put it away from themselves by their own choice: therefore, man's share in gnosis, unless God makes him know, is mere helplessness. Abu al-Hasan Nuri says: "There is none to point out the

way to God except God Himself: knowledge is sought only for due performance of His worship." No created being is capable of leading anyone to God.... Let those who deem reason to be the cause of gnosis consider what reason affirms in their minds concerning the substance of gnosis, for gnosis involves the negation of whatever is affirmed by reason, i.e., whatever notion of God can be formed by reason, God is in reality something different. How, then, is there any room for reason to arrive at gnosis by means of demonstration?" [ibid pp. 362-365]

### 3. CONCERNING FAITH

"The Apostle said: "Faith is belief in God and His angels and His (revealed) books." Etymologically, faith(*iman*) means verification (*tasdiq*).

"You must know that the orthodox Muslims and the Sufis are agreed that faith has a principle and a derivative, the principle being verification in the heart, and the derivative being observance of the (Divine)command. Now the Arabs commonly and customarily transfer the name of a principle to a derivative by way of metaphor, e.g., they call the light of the sun "the sun". In this sense the former of the two parties mentioned above apply the name of faith to that obedience by which alone a man is made secure from future punishment. Mere verification (i.e., belief), without performance of the Divine commands, does not involve security. Therefore, since security is in proportion to obedience, and obedience together with verification and verbal profession is the cause of security, they bestowed on obedience the name of faith.

"The other party, however, asserted that gnosis, not obedience, is the cause of security. Obedience, they said, is of no avail without gnosis, whereas one who has gnosis but lacks obedience will be saved at the last, although it depends on the Will of God whether he shall be pardoned by Divine grace or through the intercession of the Apostle, or whether he shall be punished according to the measure of his sin and then be delivered from Hell and transported to Paradise. Therefore, since those who have gnosis, although they are sinners, by reason of their gnosis do not remain forever in Hell, while those who have only works without gnosis do not enter Paradise, it follows that here obedience is not the cause of security. The Apostle said: "None of you shall be saved by his works." Hence in reality, without any controversy among Muslims, faith is gnosis and acknowledgment and acceptance of works.

"Whoever knows God knows Him by one of His attributes, and the most elect of His attributes are of three kinds: those connected with His beauty (*Jamal*) and with His majesty (*Jalal*) and with His perfection (*Kamal*). His perfection is not attainable except by those whose perfection is established and whose imperfection is banished. There remain beauty and majesty. Those whose evidence in gnosis is the beauty of God are always longing for vision, and those whose evidence is His majesty are always abhorring their own attributes and their hearts are stricken with awe. Now longing is an effect of love, and so is abhorrence of human attributes, because the lifting of the veil of human attributes is the very essence of love. Therefore, faith and gnosis are love, and obedience is a sign of love. Whoever denies this neglects the command of God and knows nothing of gnosis. This evil is manifest among the aspirants to Sufism at the present day. Some heretics, seeing their excellence and persuaded of their high degree, imitate them and say: "Trouble only lasts while you do not know God: as soon as you know Him, all the labour of obedience is removed from the body." But they are wrong. I reply that when you know Him, the heart is filled with longing and His command is held in greater veneration than before....

"In short, faith is really the absorption of all human attributes in the search of God. This must be unanimously acknowledged by all believers. The might of gnosis overwhelms the attributes of

agnosticism, and where faith exists agnosticism is banished, for, as it is said: "A lamp is of no use when the dawn rises." God hath said: "Kings, when they enter a city, ruin it" (The Qur'an 27:34). When gnosis is established in the heart of the gnostic, the empire of doubt and scepticism and agnosticism is utterly destroyed, and the sovereignty of gnosis subdues his senses and passions so that in all his looks and acts and words he remains within the circle of its authority. [*ibid* pp. 384-386]

#### 4. CONCERNING PURIFICATION FROM FOULNESS

"After faith, the first thing incumbent on everyone is purification (*tabarat*) and the performance of prayer, to cleanse the body from filth and pollution.... and to wipe the head with water as the law prescribes, or to use sand in the absence of water or in severe illness. Purification is of two kinds: outward and inward. Thus, prayer requires purification of the body, and gnosis requires purification of the heart. As, in the former case, the water must be clean, so in the latter case unification must be pure and belief undefiled. The Sufis are always engaged in purification outwardly and in unification inwardly. The Apostle said to one of his Companions: "Be constant in ablution, that thy two guardian angels may love thee," and God hath said: "God loves those who often repent and those who purify themselves" (The Qur'an 2:222). And the Apostle used to say in his invocations: "O God, purify my heart from hypocrisy." Even consciousness of the miraculous grace (*karamat*) vouchsafed to him he regarded as an affirmation of other than God, for in unification it is hypocrisy (*nifaa*) to affirm other than God.... Therefore, outward and inward purification must go together; e.g., when a man washes his hands he must wash his heart clean of worldliness, and when he puts water in his mouth he must purify his mouth from the mention of other than God, and when he washes his face he must turn away from all familiar objects and turn towards God, and when he wipes his head he must resign his affairs to God, and when he washes his feet he must not form the intention of taking his stand on anything except according to the command of God. Thus, he will be doubly purified...The method of spiritual purification is to reflect and meditate on the evil of this world and to perceive that it is false and fleeting and to make the heart empty of it. This result can be attained only by much self-mortification (*mujahadah*), and the most important act of mortification is to observe the external rules of discipline assiduously in all circumstances. It is related that Ibrahim Khawwas said: "I desire God to give me an everlasting life in this world, in order that, while men are engrossed in the pleasures of the world and forget God, I may observe the rules of religion amidst the affliction of the world and remember God." [*ibid* pp. 388-389]

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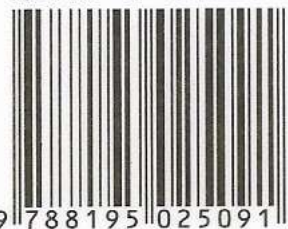
*Wajoodis*



Yearning for closeness to the Almighty is the hallmark of Sufism. This book is intended to provide the introductory material on Sufism, encompassing its history and underlying concepts. The characteristic features of all the strands of Sufism have been discussed. Terms like *Fana*, *Baqā*, *Kashf*, *Wahadatul Wajood* and *Wahadatul Shahood* have been elucidated in simple language. The related issues have been studied with references to the primary sources of Islamic Shari'ah: The Qur'an and the Sunnat (traditions) of Prophet Muhammad (may peace and blessings of Allah be on him). Details on the lives and deeds with citations of views of some prominent Sufis have also been provided.

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D-307-A, Abul Fazl Enclave  
Okhla, Jamia Nagar, New Delhi - 110 025  
Ph: 011-26971423 / +91-9990862029

ISBN 978-81-950250-9-1



Price: ₹ 110