

## **WHAT IS SUFISM**

**Ali Ansari – June 8, 07**

Sufism is any means by which people become Sufis. The word "Sufi" comes from the Arabic word Safa`, which means pure, clean, complete. It implies having gone through the required personal disciplines of self-purification to attain to our original state. These disciplines are referred to in Arabic as Tasawwuf and that is the origin of the word Sufism. "Sufi" implies being self-realized and confirmed - innocent, pure and forgiven in the eyes of God. It implies, as a result of such realization, a full understanding of, agreement with, and ability to teach, the origin, purpose, goals and central teachings of all religions - to know and love the lord thy God with all your body, mind, heart, soul and spirit. That's what Sufi means. Nothing less is acceptable.

Though the word stems from the Arabic, the potential of Sufism - to purify our outward manifest behavior to match our inward spiritual reality- is available in every beating heart, and completely independent of language or religion. This is why Sufis are not interested in conversions. Though religion may be a suitable vehicle for self-purification, self-realization is not dependent upon it, but upon understanding and personal effort. True religion is revealed to assist and guide humanity in our work to reaching the fulfillment of our Divine potential, but that work is dependent upon the quality of the teachers. If the fruit is not sweet, the quality of the water becomes questionable. So religion is dependent upon the self-realized teachers, but self-realization is not dependent upon religion. One who is truly self-realized, however, will understand the origins, purpose and meaning of all religions, coming to their aid with no aversion to any of them on this ground.

Most religions are simply the deliverance of a message from God; allowing and insisting that each individual find his own way to the point and goal of that message. In that respect, each religion has its own general parameters for self-purification, and some are stronger in that regard than others. So the degree of personal guidance available in all religions depends upon the level of realization of those who teach them.

The point and means of self-purification is very strong in the religion of Islam. A vast but silent majority in the world of Islam believes clearly that without guidance, there is no benefit from religion. It is for that reason that the practices of spiritual purification and reverence for spiritual masters as guides are so evident and have flourished there so well. This is not to say that the goals of self-realization and aid to humanity are not recognized in and by all religions and spiritual practices. But the very nature of the Islamic revelation is such a manifestation of Divine Mercy and Guidance as to make the practices of self-purification and personal usefulness easily accessible to all. Indeed, salvation of the soul and humanity is its very purpose.

True self-realization is the first fruit and beginning of the spiritual work, and it is a sufficient reward for the effort. Self-realization implies the ability to receive proper guidance from within, to make constructive and rightly guided choices on the pathway through life to success. By making your peace with God you become free of the hindering effects of your inner contradictions and fears, and the totality of your spirit is free to be focused on the matters at hand. Self-realization is the key to true success. All scriptures and spiritual teachings teach this, all religions point to it, and all paths and disciplines have it as the goal.

Self-realization is dependent upon Surrender, the Surrender to Truth and the relinquishing of the false and self-created reactionary self that we have used so effectively to get our way in life. It is often feared that the renunciation of our false self is the renunciation of life itself. But the reality is quite the opposite. In the relinquishing of our false selves, with all of their illusory and made-up rules as to how the world is, we re-inherit our true self and begin to live our lives fully in the Divine reality. And in the knowledge of the Divine, everything is real, however temporary it may be, and a reflection of that which is indeed eternal.

So the deeds we create in this life will be with us and enhanced, in the next. And this is the living in a life that is independent of, yet supportive of, the life and death of our bodies. This eternity, in the midst of which we may choose to continue to play our personal games, is dependent upon the Will of God alone, and there is nothing we or anyone else can do to change that. This is the message of religions and the understanding to which we wish to surrender. Then our true self will manifest in all its glory and splendor. Then we will understand that God did indeed create us in His own image.

But just as God has created us in His own image, we too have done the same thing by creating ourselves, our pseudo-selves, our replacement selves, in reaction to and as a means of coping with the other self-created images and ideologies with which we are met upon entrance into this material plane. Slowly but surely, as we became more and more conscious to the world in which we were born, we made conscious decisions to surrender to coercion and conform to whatever it was that circumstances dictated convenient and practical in what was being taught to us to be the "real" world. We soon came to believe that we are what we have created of ourselves out of our desire to conform and get along. So we quite naturally feel constantly disconnected from our original reality, and thrust into the commonly accepted but very paradigmatic (as in artificially created) world of norms that we refer to as our "culture", or "society".

But like all cultures that are based upon commonly accepted "material" values, the illusion in which we find ourselves begins to fade. Simply because it is based upon mutually accepted illusions, it slowly becomes apparent to many individuals involved that it really doesn't work, and that its superficial goals will bring no lasting satisfaction. This breeds the overwhelming sense of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, emptiness and depression that is now prevalent everywhere. Hence the decline and fall of empires. Only thing is, nobody will talk about it. Just like in the story of the Emperor's New Clothes.

So, do you feel - DISCONNECTED FROM YOU PERSONAL REALITY?

Our reality is not what we think it is and we are not who we think we are, but we are never disconnected from it, it's quite impossible. We only feel that way – disconnected - because of how we think and the mind that we think with. Most minds are made up of reactionary realities. "If I say this, I'll get that", and the like. Have you ever heard of the mystic saying that life is a dream and the world is an illusion? Life is very real. It is important that we clarify that. It is believing in the illusion of the world being as we think it is that keeps us from discovering an even better reality - that the world is exactly as we want it to be. We can have what we really want or what we think we want, but to have what we really want, we must give up what we think we want, and to have what we think we want we can lose what we really want.

We must become clear on our issues with Life. And in order to do that we must work through them to be in touch with our own personal Reality, for That is from God. And this can be done best and most easily with the help and guidance of a realized Sufi teacher. People in their minds may feel that they have a choice in this matter and they do, but the choice may not be what they think it is. Realized masters know how important it is to self-realize, to know the Reality, and not just the concept, of God, Love and Self while on this planet and in this life.

So please recognize the significance and understand the importance of religion in general, the Islamic revelation specifically and Surrender to Al-llah!, the One. As we become older in anticipation of our departure from this planet, it becomes increasingly important to not be worried about ourselves, as this concern should have been resolved first, but to be able to leave behind a legacy of right guidance for others. Surrender to oneness without the guidance of faith is stagnation, just as belief in religion without self-realization, which is the reality and result of true Surrender, is simply division.

Millions of Muslims, the silent majority, as I like to say, are very aware of the importance of their religion and are respectful of all religion in general. They understand the importance of a spiritually guided and self-realized Sufi teacher, and for the most part consider themselves to be, in one way or another, under the tutelage of one, not always living - and are living the life of a guided student. This belief in and affiliation with the holy people of their time is not idolization but the acceptance of the reality of qualified and religiously sanctified guides as teachers and role models of the highest caliber.

The path cannot and should not be negotiated alone. It is incorrect to think, from a disconnected and alienated mind, that you necessarily stand alone and must negotiate your path of life and death by yourself. This would be to reject the eminently practical guidance offered by your elders in the way of life who care and are concerned for you. Allowing our reactions to parenting - that may have arisen as a result of any lack of guidance from our parents - to interfere with our search for a spiritual family and a guide to our own truth can be and is, for the most part, a disastrous mistake.

Classical family structure in the Islamic, Hindu and Buddhist worlds includes the spiritual master, as it is well known that children will have reactions to, and emotional disagreements with, even the best of parents. The importance of individuation - self-realization - in the maturation process is well known in the circles of western psychology. It was so well understood and prioritized by spiritual families that it was considered not simply desirable but necessary to send their children, at the proper age, to continue their upbringing and education at the hand and under the guidance of a Guru, Sufi or Spiritual teacher. Individuation itself is the work of each individual, but it takes a completely individuated and self-realized master to assist, complete and confirm the process.

Just remember this - that all spiritual masters have one. That is the essence of all chains of transmission, whether they be in the martial arts or spiritual and religious studies.

## ENLIGHTENMENT AND THE VEIL OF UNITY

Enlightenment is the full body realization and acceptance of the oneness of God (Al-lah!) in all His manifestations, and the non-existence of a separate, isolated self - that there is no separation, except in the imaginations of the mind. This realization (be not content with conceptualization) of the oneness of God is God-realization in its fullest and the total annihilation of the lower, personally motivated self. It is inevitable, and nothing less is acceptable. It is also Bliss and the realization of Nirvana and all other words denoting the divinity of our reality.

Surrender is the Source of Life. It is not, and cannot be a concept. It must be a complete acceptance of God and Self as a manifestation of Divine Will. It is not the goal of the Work but the beginning. After spending time with God as God is, alone, we will eventually return to our "senses" so to speak, cleaned, refreshed and inspired. This 'return is the reality of self-realization. We cannot truly know ourselves without knowing God first. So how do we get to know God? By learning, accepting and being guided by His revelations. And through knowing God, we know ourselves. And we cannot know the Reality of God without including ourselves.

So again I emphasize that without the aid and guidance of religion, including and culminating in the Islamic revelation, which includes and accepts all religions, beliefs and people as creations and manifestations of God, there can be only more communities in spiritual isolation, and no real coming together of humanity.

Correcting the imaginative mind that sees itself as alone, fearful, self-sufficient, defensive, aggressive and artificially dependent upon all kinds of pleasant and unpleasant relationships, is the work of all spiritual teachings, masters and therapies. It is called by the spiritually aware "resolving our inner contradictions with God". This work leads to a total and perfect Surrender, which is the beginning of spiritual awareness, bliss and real success in the world. In Islam, this work is done, or should be done, by the Sufis. In other faiths, it is the work of the Rabbis, Gurus and spiritual teachers. It is the genuine psychotherapy - the aligning of ourselves with Divine Will.

So all sincere therapists should be regularly updated and confirmed by a master, and the process of this "reality check" is already an inherent part of modern psycho-therapeutical discipline. The similarity to the spiritual transmission chains becomes obvious. A Sufi might easily observe that C. G. Jung had attained to true self-realization and recognized the importance of establishing sitting with a master as a significant part of the discipline. I'd like to suggest that as the spiritual evolution of western culture and the English language progresses, sincere therapists of all persuasions seek confirmation and further education from a pure Sufi chain, and learn to pass it on to their clients and students. It is the true spiritual essence of their work.

But enlightenment without guidance is not enough, as religion without realization is not enough. It takes enlightenment to recognize the point, goal and meaning of religion, otherwise its practice misses its purpose. Similarly, it takes an understanding of the origin and purpose of religion to guide the enlightened, otherwise they stagnate in their own individuality. Individually enlightened masters standing alone in their light without being able to understand and reach out to the religions of the world are only creating cults and even though they claim to be in the Unity they are only creating more separation by standing alone.

It's true that there are as many ways to know God as there are hearts, but God-Realization is not enough and it is only the very beginning. Working through our resistances to knowing God is rightly called "The Work". It is the greatest healing and therapy and there are many paths offering themselves as techniques in the way of The Work, showing ways to walk through resistance, overcome doubt and attain to the absolute certainty that is there, waiting joyously for all of us. That is why this absolute certainty (iqan) is considered to be the goal of most spiritual paths and why there are as many paths as there are hearts to work through.

But absolute certainty, gnosis, God-consciousness, ma`arifat, enlightenment, nirvana, heaven, divine bliss, whatever one wishes to call the innate knowing with which we are created, is still only the beginning. All the great and realized Sufi Masters have referred to even this enlightenment as a veil - "The Veil of Unity" - and have sought Al-llah!'s guidance through it, considering it a sin to stop in it even for a moment, much less making it their home. In response to the inner-heart prayer of these gnostics and knowers - "Ihdinas Siratul Mustaqim", "Guide us to the straight path" - we have a Divine revelation, a universal religion of Surrender and seeking Guidance.

Religion can only be taught properly by the spiritually enlightened. That is why there is such an emphasis on (and reaction to) Sufism in Islam. It is often noted in Sufi circles that a student without a teacher has only his self (nafs) for a teacher. A Muslim practicing religion without a community and a teacher is practicing without the benefit of personal guidance, and missing out on the point completely. In the same light, Sufis practicing spiritual purification without accepting the Guidance of religion offered by Al-llah! are deliberately casting themselves adrift, severing the rope between their individual life rafts and the mother ship.

There is more to the Spiritual message than the work of health and knowing God in ourselves. There is the work of knowing the way through it and of coming together in outward Unity also. Simply adhering to a spiritual master or lineage is not the Way. In order for the Way to be transmitted it needs to be present in the teacher and accepted by the students, or community. There need be present a teaching that is inclusive of the traditional religious understandings, not exclusive - and a teacher who insists on that inclusion and discovery, rather than on it's exclusion. And Al-llah! is the Real Teacher and the Knower of All things.

W/peace and love,  
Ali