

## **The role and impact of emotions on human nature in the Sufi path of spiritual self-realization**

**Thomas Dähnhardt**

### **Abstract**

*The present article wants to describe some of the fundamental principles and modes concerning the path of spiritual self-realization as outlined by the authorities of Sufism within the Islamic tradition. It focuses on the individual and cosmological implications which, in the traditional Sufi world-view, are at the base of the concept of 'universalization of the individual' and investigates the role and relationship that develops and subsists between the accomplished master and his pupil during this process. The Sufi initiate undergoes not only a process of transformation, but of sublimation and refinement of his human dimension in an approach to the divine which, to many modern Muslims and non-Muslims, may appear as alien and provocative as it is challenging, since it relies on a wisdom and a vision more and more unfamiliar for those whose perception of Islam is increasingly defined by the 'outer', purely social and political dimension of Islam.*

**Keywords:** Sufism, spiritual practice, religious charisma.

Over time and around the Muslim world, the representatives of the esoteric tradition within Islām commonly referred to by the generic term Sufism (or *taṣawwuf*, as it is known in Arabic) have for long been a constant point of reference for those eager to strengthen and corroborate their adherence to the religious Tradition they were born into and grown up with. In pre-modern Muslim societies less affected by the constraints imposed by fundamentalism and religious obscurantism, to many individuals the wisdom and the charisma perpetrated by generations of spiritual authorities (*salāsil*, pl. of *silsila*) offered an attractive opportunity to broaden their intellectual horizons and deepen their understanding of their inner selves while reinforcing their personal relationship with the one and all-transcending Divine

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principle, Allāh.

Such general attitude translated into a neatly defined purpose for an individual's existence through the articulate teachings and specific methods of self-realization described and prescribed by the Sufi path (*ṭarīqa*)<sup>1</sup>. The latter provided direction to the single individual's intentions, touching on and addressing his faith, thoughts and emotions. It thus enabled the common believer (*al-ʿawāmm*) and the spiritually inclined (*al-khawāṣṣ*) alike to complement the formal ritualism and normative behavior prescribed by the *sharīʿa* and the custodians of Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy, the *ʿulamā*. Moreover, it provided a real opportunity of attaining to direct personal participation at the mysteries underlying the prophetic message (*risāla*). The vision of the inner self and the outer world derived from the contemplative knowledge and spiritual practices as taught by the authoritative Sufi Shaikh thus enabled Muslims of all kinds to actively share into both the human and the spiritual dimension of Muḥammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the messenger of Islām (*rasūl Allāh*) and seal of prophethood (*khatm al-nubuwwat*), thereby achieving a lasting sense of satisfaction for the practitioner while strengthening his identity as integral part of the community of rightful believers at large (*umma*).<sup>2</sup> *Taṣawwuf* and its

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the meaning inherent to the term *ṭarīqa* as derived from the Arabic verbal root *ṭa-ra-qa* comprises both the knowledge of the theoretical background describing the goal set and the path to travel on and the specific methods and practical applications contemplated and employed by any given Sufi order in order to achieve this sublime goal (*maqṣad*).

<sup>2</sup> Such underlying attitude is rooted in the Sufi tenet that attributes to the descendants of Ḥaḍrat Ādam, considered by Islām and Sufism to be both the first human being and the first prophet (*nabī*), the status of being the most perfect among Gods' creatures, since the primordial, archetypal man embodies in his nature all the divine attributes of God. The idea, though not derived directly from the Qur'ān, is as ancient as Islām itself and was elaborated in great detail by the great Sufi master Ibn ʿArabī (1165-1240 AD) and one of his principal interpreters, ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (1365-1424 AD). Both describe the human individual as being the reflection of his Creator and His essence (*al-dhāt*) Perfect Man (*insān al-kāmil*). This corresponds to the full realization of the relationship between God and His creatures through the attainment of total divine consciousness. By spiritual dimension of the prophet Muḥammad, we intend the *ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadī*, which represents the archetypal and determining principle of the Universe, as expounded by the *shaikh al-akbar*.

authorities were thus instrumental in fostering a strong sense of both social and self-identity emphasizing a universalistic world-view that contemplated the individual as a microcosm (*‘ālam al-ṣuḡhrā*) comprising on a minor scale the entire possibilities of the macrocosm (*‘ālam al-kubrā*) while at the same time stressing the former’s innate capacity to effectively achieve the identification between the two domains. Whereas these notions were originally revealed to and propagated by the prophet of Islām they were later interpreted and elaborated by the Sufi leaders who considered themselves as intimate ‘friends of God’ (*awliyā Allāh*)<sup>3</sup> and heirs of the prophetic chain that had begun with Adam, the first human being, and come to an end with the death of the ‘seal of prophethood’. Encoded in a specifically Islamic mode, as contemplated in principle in the Qur’ān and the prophetic Traditions (*aḥādīth*),<sup>4</sup> the guidance offered by the *shuyukh* (pl. of *shaikh*) addressed the existential desire shared by all humans for complementing their contingent existence in the realm of immanence with a continuous, personal relationship with the transcendent dimension of the divinity. This would allow those seeking their mediation to experience Allāh’s closeness (*qurbat*) and gratifying presence (*ḥaḍra*) both within themselves and in the surrounding world, during moments of intimate devotion (*‘ibādāt*) as well as through the manifold social interactions in the routine of public life (*mu‘āmalāt*). In this context, human emotions were important since they could play a significant role in awakening the desire of the human individual for self-realization directing him towards the noble purpose of reconciling his contingent existence with the totality of Universal existence (*al-*

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<sup>3</sup> This is one of the many terms by which Sufis describe themselves, the word ‘Sufi’ being almost exclusively a word used by those outside the traditions of *taṣawwuf*.

<sup>4</sup> The most quoted Qur’ānic reference is the verse 41:53 (*Sūrat fuṣṣilat*): *We will show them Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth...*; the most explicit prophetic tradition at this regard is the following: The Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (702-765 AD) said: “The Prophet of God dispatched a contingent of the army (to the battlefield). Upon their return, he said: ‘Blessed are those who have performed the minor *jihād* and have yet to perform the major *jihād*.’ When asked, ‘What is the major *jihād*?’ the Prophet replied: ‘The *jihād* of the soul (struggle against self)’. (Al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār*, vol. 19, p. 182, *ḥadīth* no. 31)

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*kawn*) and its ultimately source, the Divine being itself. In the historical context of Islām as the last great (monotheistic) religious Tradition to appear in the theatre of mankind, emotions (*jadhbat*, pl. of *jadhba*) assumed an even greater role as means of devotional transport capable of projecting the partitioning initiate's inner self onto a higher plane. It thus supplanted and complemented the more intellectual (*'aqlī*) approach which remained the preserve of a very restricted number of elected members of Muslim faithful.

In the course of their presence in South Asia, long, uninterrupted generational chains of major and minor Sufi authorities (*salāsīl*, pl. of *silsila*) have inherited and contributed to adapt an increasingly elaborate spiritual science (*'ilm al-rūḥānī*) the quintessential meaning of which lies at the very heart of the Islamic *Dīn* and focuses on the well-being and perfectioning of the human individual (*insān*). It is the role and responsibility of each single member of these spiritual chains to address man's inclination to seek self-realization in search of the ultimate reason and fulfillment of his ephemeral life on earth. If on one side the Sufi order's widespread appeal derived from the successful integration of Islām's social, juridical and theological framework with practical investigations (*tahqīq*) concerning the nature of God and the relation it bears with His creation (*al-khalq*) and His creatures (*makhluqāt*), on the other, especially in the Indo-Pak subcontinent, it was the Sufi masters' intention to expand the sphere of influence of Islam in a non-Islamic society from the secluded environments of temporal power to the masses of the illiterate folk. It was their role of mediation that ultimately sanctioned the success for the spread of an Islām that considered *taṣawwuf* as an integral part of its universal constitution. In the process, these Sufis created an effective network of spiritual assistance that covered large part of the territory (*walāyat*) and reached out to all segments of society. In this task, for which they relied equally on oral and scriptural transmission, each with its peculiar characteristics and functions, but complementary to and integrating each other, the capacity to arise, interpret and direct human emotions, was an equally important mean to capture the attention and attract those awakened to the desire towards their expert guidance.

As far as textual tradition is concerned, the treasure of wisdom preserved in the context of the institutionalized Sufi orders (*ṭuruq*, pl.

of *ṭarīqa*) finds its expression in the production of a vast body of doctrinal treatises and practical handbooks (*risālāt*), hagiographic biographies (*tadhkirāt*) spiritual diaries (*malfūzāt*) and epistles (*maktūbāt*) written, collected and preserved by generations of affiliates to the tradition of *taṣawwuf*. Each genre in its own fashion, illustrates the theoretical background as well as the rich repertoire of methods and techniques aimed at achieving progress on the path of spiritual perfection (*sulūk*) and proximity to God (*qurbat*) and exalt the piety of those who have left their mark for the sake of this noble purpose. Inspired by references hidden in the authoritative scriptural sources of Islām, i.e. the Holy Qur’ān and the prophetic Traditions (*ḥadīth*), on the whole Sufi authors have paid major attention to keep their teachings in line with Islamic orthodoxy and orthopraxy (*bā-shar‘*), although there are exceptions to this. Thus, over time each Sufi order has developed its peculiar set of prescriptive texts which preserve and pass on the spiritual treasure cultivated by its spiritual forefathers (*buzurgān-i ṭarīqa*) and which are continuously nourished, extended and adapted by the present generations. This textual treasure represents the backbone and red thread linking the past with the present and attests of the importance of written authority in order to preserve the memory of the past while actualizing it through oral explications in the present. All those sources contain more or less detailed and systematic analyses of the human nature and constitution (*ṭabī‘at-i insānī*) and the necessity to take into account for during the process of spiritual education the upbringing and cultivation of the human soul for the sake of refining the human substratum into a medium for effectively reflecting, absorbing and assimilating the qualities of the superior spheres of Creation. However, these same sources keep stressing that the real task of spiritual upbringing (*tarbiyat*) pertains to the domain of direct or intuitive knowledge (*‘ilm al-ḥuḍūrī*) and as such goes beyond the analytical acquirement of knowledge based on logic (*‘ilm al-ḥusūlī*). Its transmission cannot be obtained but through the subtle channels of spiritual education (*rūḥānī ta‘līm*) that relies on the subtle affinity of the unseen components of the human constitution, beyond the rational sphere of the mind.

From the above considerations, it becomes obvious that it is the direct relationship between the living spiritual guide (*murshid bar*

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*Ḥaqq*) and his disciple (*murīd*)<sup>5</sup> that lies at the core of the Sufi pattern of transmission of knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and of spiritual influence (*baraka*). Based largely on physical co-presence and oral communication, this relationship guarantees the vitality of the tradition inherited through the oath of allegiance (*bai'ah*) the disciple makes to the spiritual teacher at the outset of their relationship, that is during the moment of receiving initiation into the *ṭarīqa*.<sup>6</sup> The vow of reciprocal allegiance and loyalty, derived from an ancient model of sealing a pact of loyalty among Arab tribal leaders, implies the transmission of the current of spiritual influence that determines the efficacy of the methods and the capacity of comprehension of the doctrinal tenets taught and explained by the *Shaiḫ* in the course of private teaching sessions. In fact, the intimate relation between spiritual director and spiritual apprentice sanctions the actuality of the *ṭarīqa* and hence its very *raison d'être*, since it provides assurance for the perpetuation of the wisdom and practical knowledge acquired in the past and in the present that guarantees the transformation (or rather *sublimation*) of the disciple's inner states and soul (*tadhkiya al-naḥs*). It thereby becomes the fundamental means to overcome the distance between the ancestral tradition going back to the time of the prophet and from him to the very beginning of time at the outset of Creation, and the last living representative of the tradition, nay the very source of its spiritual power, ultimately re-enacting archetypal situations and implications which by their very nature transcend as an integral part of the limitations of time and space and tie the practicing disciple into the

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<sup>5</sup> This term derives from the Arabic verbal root *a-rā da* ("to will"), bearing the meaning *he who is moved by [trueful] intention*; in the Sufi context, the term indicates the importance of directing one's will and intention onto the goal for the sake of attaining to its realization under the direction of the *murshid bar Ḥaqq*, that is *he who provides guidance to the attainment of Truth or God*.

<sup>6</sup> The Qur'anic sanction of this act of acknowledging loyalty and assistance in a noble cause is the following, revealed to the prophet of Islām just after the pledge of satisfaction (*bai'at al-riḍwān*) and also known as the pledge of the tree (*bai'at al-shajrah*), by his companions (*ṣahāba*) prior to the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah in 6 AH/628AD: *Certainly Allāh was well pleased with the believers when they swore allegiance to you under the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts, so He sent down tranquillity on them and rewarded them with a near victory...* (Cor. 48:18)

chain of transmission. It is in this context that emotions can effectively arise in the practitioner of the spiritual discipline and channelled through the attentive supervision of the spiritual director towards the attainment of progressively higher stages of sublimation of the human soul. The principal force of attraction that lies at the root of all 'positive' emotions is love (*'ishq*), the most primordial of all emotions whence the very world came into being and which, in a process leading into the opposite direction of return to the Principle (*rujū*'), effectively represents the complementation and reversal of the creative act perpetrated by the Creator (*al-Khāliq*). Ironically or perhaps rather quite naturally, this implies, at least during the beginning stages of the path and among other things, the necessity for the neophyte to remain in close contact with the living master, sharing his daily routine and adapting his life-style, outer gestures as well as inner attitudes while preferably living within the precincts of the Sufi monastery (*khānaqāh*) where the *shaikh* resides, so as to strengthen the adherence and conform his individuality to that prescribed by the *ṭarīqa* tangibly represented by the *shaikh*. The aim is to conform inwardly and outwardly to the nature of the *murshid*, for example to his character which can be either predominantly severe, rigorous, sometimes even harsh and sturdy (*jalālī*) or otherwise, gentle, mild and accommodating (*jamālī*).<sup>7</sup> In his effective role of 'heir' (*wārith*) of the archetypical spiritual forefather of all Muslims, i.e. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā, the *shaikh* represents the perfect living example of spiritual perfection to which a loyal and qualified disciple most comply and identify. Eventually, this manifestation of love for the spiritual instructor culminates in the 'extinction in the spiritual guide' (*fanā fi'l-shaikh*), an important preliminary step on the path of self-perfectioning.<sup>8</sup> All this is very

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<sup>7</sup> For an interesting examination of these aspects in Sufi practice, in particular in the context of the Chishti order (see Saniotis 2012: 65–83). In a way, the assimilation thus aimed for is a reflection of the attitude born out of the desire to comply with the *sunna* of the prophet by imitating his perfect example down to the most minute detail.

<sup>8</sup> This apparent devotion to a howsoever perfect human being has frequently been criticized by muslim esotericists who interpret it as an illegitimate act of association to the rank of the One divine Being, Allāh (*shirk*). Such accusations testify for the superficial attitude that move many modern 'defenders' of Islām, whose intellectual vision is obscured by a grave narrowness of mind and spirit, since it is incapable of

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important also for understanding the role and importance played by emotions in the context of the *ṭarīqa*, for these too comply with the spiritual instructor's intention to lift the follower of the Sufi path from the initial level of uncultivated individuality to an ever increasing degree of refinement towards universalization through conformation with the celestial attributes of the angels and, ultimately, the Divine. In many sufi orders, the most perfect stage of the relationship thus established leads is known as *rābiʿa*. The technical sense of this term implies the subsistence of an inner tie between the *shaikh* and the *murīd* that enables the former to transmit the current of his mental power and spiritual energy through a subtle channel of communication

By definition,<sup>9</sup> to follow the Sufi path entails the interiorization of the Islamic ritual subsumed in the five pillars (*arkān*, pl. of *rukʿn*) of

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distinguishing between the subtle difference underlying the Principle and its cause and/or agent, the former alone attaining to Allāh himself whereas the latter is, however sublime in rank, part of creation and as such cannot (and must not) be confused with a possible object of worship (*ʿibādat*). The same discourse applies to the numerous accusations moved against Sufi authorities and their teachings which includes the description of *rābiʿa*, the spiritual bond between the *shaikh* and his disciple (*murīd*) which arises out of and is nurtured through the technique of 'visualization of the spiritual guide' (*taṣawwur al-shaikh*), a method used in many Sufi orders as a means to supplement to the physical and temporal distance between the present-day initiate and the past generations of powerful *māshaikh*, leading all the way back to the fountainhead of all spiritual grace (*faḍl*), the prophet of Islām and, ultimately, Allāh himself.

<sup>9</sup> Among the many classifications of the diverse Sufi groups found in scholarly works, one commonly encountered distinguishes those adhering to the precepts of muslim Law, known as *bā-sharʿ* (lit.: adhering to the Law), and those who put themselves deliberately without the context of the *sharīʿa*, known as *be-sharʿ* (lit.: 'without Law'). For a study of these typologies and their implications for South Asian Sufis, especially in Pakistan (see Frembgen 2004: 245-257).

Among those who most authoritatively elaborated on the intimate relationship subsisting between the tenets of the religious Law (*sharīʿa*) and the degrees of spiritual self-realization was Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (971/1564-1034/1624), a prominent leader in the South Asian branch of the *ṭarīqa* Naqshbandiyya. His influential reworking of the Sufi doctrine known as *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unicity of existence) earned him the reverential title *Mujaddid al-fī thānī* (Renewer of the Second Millennium of Islām), reason for which the main Indian branch of the Naqshbandiyya after him came to be known as Mujaddidiyya.



Islām, i.e. witnessing (*shahāda*), ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), fasting (*sawm*), charity (*zakāt*) and pilgrimage (*hajj*), eventually leading to the comprehension of their underlying truth and value at a higher, spiritual level (*ḥaqīqat*). Such process brings about the intensification of the *sharī'a* through *ṭarīqa* leading to the *sharī'a*'s implication's full adherence to or identification with *ḥaqīqa*. The meaning of its outer applications on an interior, subtle plane and hence implies, ultimately, the perfectioning of an individual's identity as Muslim. The efficacy of the teachings perpetrated by the Sufis, in the past and present, relies in good part on the psychological insight of the living spiritual guide (*murshid*) whose intimate understanding of and vigilant presence over the inner progress of his pupil (*murīd*)<sup>10</sup> represents a core aspect of the process of traversing the path of spiritual self-realization. The *murshid*'s knowledge of the complex, multi-layered human constitution (*ṭabī'yat*) combined with his capacity to recognize and address the moods and motions of the human soul (*naḥs*)<sup>11</sup> guarantees the correct development of the *murīd*'s psycho-mental component towards the goal of inner perfectioning and fine tuning with the universal values implied in Divine consciousness. Based on his own experience and a recipient of that of his spiritual predecessors in the *ṭarīqa*, the *shaikh* masters the means to incline, transpose and therefore educate the *naḥs* of his *protégé* onto a higher, ever more sublime level increasingly refined from the coarse, uncultivated state and mentality of the uninitiate (*naḥs-i ammārah*) 'wont to the command' (this being the literal meaning of the term *ammārah* as a feminine adjective related to *naḥs*) of lower human instincts and ignorance (*ghaḥflat*).<sup>12</sup> The initiate undergoing this

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<sup>10</sup> The term *murīd* denotes the will of the initiate (lit.: 'he who possesses the right will') to undertake the traversing of the path of self-purification and introspection, determined to reach the goal of achieving true closeness to and intimacy (*qurbat*) with the source and principle of all existence, i.e. God. It is closely related to the term *naḥs* meaning 'breathing'. For a brief description of these terms (see Dähnhardt (2007): 118).

<sup>11</sup> The term *naḥs* used in different contexts, bears different meanings, even in many places in the Qur'ān. In most cases the term *naḥs* (pl. *anḥus* or *nufus*) has been used to refer to the human soul (12:54), to God or God (5:116), to jinn (6:130), to the human soul (6:93) and so forth.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Cor. 12:53 (Sūrah Yūsuf): *I do not seek to acquit myself; for surely one's self*

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kind of experience gradually ascends from the profane human state of ‘fallen mankind’ to the angelical, celestial and, ultimately divine attributes that constitute the higher state of the ‘crown of all Divine creatures’ (*tāj al-makhlūqāt*). This kind of spiritual assistance awakens and nourishes the determination of the initiate *sālik* (lit.: ‘the spiritual wayfarer’) to pursue and actively engage in the effort of inner purification and refinement of the psycho-mental aggregate resorting to the methods indicated by his *shaikh* while remaining under the latter’s constant supervision. However, apart from this primary responsibility of the Sufi master, the applications of which remain hidden in the secluded surroundings of the spiritual circle (*ḥalqa*), an authoritative *shaikh* often holds also a public role as advisor, healer, exorcist and, to resort to a term taken from modern psychology, counsellor. Thus, in a traditional society the Sufi *shaikh* plays the role of a psychologist taking care of the fears, uncertainties, doubts and aspirations of the common believer, while recognizing and singling out those qualified for spiritual education (*al-khawāṣṣ*) and providing them with the instructions necessary for moving beyond the merely individual, human domain of religious piety.

The knowledge of these notions and techniques has been elaborated, adapted and handed down in an uninterrupted chain of transmission (*silsila*) between master (*pīr o shaikh*) and disciple (*murīd*), which has been perpetuated and adapted them according to the specific circumstances. Different from the spiritual insights that accompany the spiritual path, emotions pertain to the individual sphere

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*prompts one to evil except him to whom my Lord may show mercy. Verily my Lord is Ever Forgiving, Most Merciful.* The term *nafs* as used in the Qur’ān can be intended either as a living being’s individuality as such or, more specifically, as the subtle body intermittent between the physical aggregate of the body made of the four elements (*‘anāṣir al-arba’*) earth, water, air and fire, and the non-human, spiritual component of the *rūh*. Thus becomes clear the subordinate place of the *nafs* as compared to the *rūh*, the former pertaining strictly to the individual, human domain of Creation (*al-khalq*) while the latter belongs properly to the super-individual, i.e. universal domain of the Transcendent (*al-amr*). For the Qur’anic sanction of the Sufi initiate’s struggle to achieve sublimation of his individual, psycho-mental aggregate, cf. also Cor. 91:7-9: *By the soul and (by) Him who made it perfect, and then inspired it to understand what is wrong and what is right for it. Truly is successful the one who purifies (his soul)...*

of a human being and therefore are ultimately contingent (*mumkin*), since they relate an individual to the realm of the ephemeral world (*duniyā al-fānī*). However, in the esoteric perspective of *taṣawwuf*, the aim is to harmonize the constitution of a human individual conceived as a microcosm (*‘ālam al-ṣaghīr*) with the entire creation intended as a macrocosm (*‘ālam al-kabīr*) thus bringing about the universalization of man, considered as the most perfect of God’s creatures. Under the careful supervision of an expert guide (*murshid bar Ḥaqq*), the spiritual wayfarer (*sālik*) of any such discipline (*ṭarīqa*) engages through them actively in the process of purifying his soul, i.e. psycho-mental aggregate, in order to overcome the narrow limitations of his individual ego. Such practice is often termed as *tadhkiya al-nafs*, i.e. the sublimation of the lower instincts that govern the soul of the common, uninitiated and hence unrefined soul of the common individual (*al-‘awāmm*) into gradually more and more subtle, celestial virtues, which involve the constant application and repetition of a sacred formula known as *dhikr*. The spiritual authorities have since long elaborated the science pertaining to this method which involves the entire human aggregate consisting of physical body (*jism*), psycho-mental plane (*nafs*) and spirit (*rūḥ*). Numerous references and detailed accounts of the ‘science of commemoration’ (*‘ilm al-dhikr*) have been attested by almost all influential Sufi authorities and are extensively addressed both in their oral and written teachings.

Among the human emotions, a central role assigned to love and devotion deserves major attention, since it is the single most and quintessential emotion whence is triggered off the very existence of the realm of creation (*‘ālam al-khalq*). The concept of *‘ishq* plays a central role not only in the traditional spiritual disciplines, but finds its outward reflection as a traditional theme in poetry (*shā‘irī*). This latter allows the poet-initiate the space to develop the often ambiguous relation between the sphere of individual feelings or sentiments and the transcendent dimension of universal spirituality, combining human love (*‘ishq al-majāzī*) and divine love (*‘ishq al-ḥaqīqī*) in a specific blend expressed through a terminology that allows for identification with both the profane and the initiate. The poets thereby further develop and build on love as the source of all ‘positive’ emotions, that setting out from a the commonly shared experience of love within this immanent

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world is conducive to a higher purpose in the realm of transcendency.

From an attentive study of the numerous Sufi treatises (*risālāt*) compiled over time in- and outside India it becomes clear that the process of spiritual realization as envisaged by the spiral teachers of Sufism aims at reverting the cosmological process of 'existentialization' in order to lead the initiate from the differentiated multiplicity of the created world (*al-khalq*) back to the state of primordial indifferentiation inherent in the principle of Divine unicity prior to the unfolding of the creative process (*takhlīq*). This, in short, is the meaning of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unicity of existence), the name applied to the cosmological and metaphysical doctrine formulated in principle by the Andalusian Sufi Muḥī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (1165-1240 AD), reverentially referred to as *Shaiḫ al-akbar*. To the latter goes the credit of laying the theoretical base on which in the course of the following centuries leading Sufi authorities have built and developed the complex doctrinal and methodological edifice aimed at achieving the spiritual restoration of mankind, a process which over time came to be described by the term *ṭarīqa*. In the technical vocabulary of Sufism, *ṭarīqa* indicates both the spiritual path and the method peculiar to each Sufi order envisaged as a beaten track cleared by the spiritual ancestors with the purpose of offering oncoming generations the possibility to experience and interiorize in life the dogmatic assertion of *tawḥīd* (lit.: tendency towards the One) that lies at the core of Islamic monotheism.

As a religion, Islām offers mankind a way of life based on a double prerogative: the submission of the individual to the will of Allāh (*taslīm*) and, as a result, the attainment of an inner (and outer) state of peace (*salām*) and integrity (*salāmat*). By conforming himself to the *Dīn* summed up in the formula of the *shahāda*, Man, the foremost creature, becomes a *Muslim* who envisages his Creator and Cherisher as the supreme Lord (*al-Rabb*), the one and unique source of ultimate authority and sovereignty. According to the *sharīʿa*, every single *Muslim* has the possibility to relate himself to Allāh by submitting himself to His will; he thereby becomes 'abd (pl.: 'abīd), a loyal and humble servant (*ābid*) who turns to his Lord imbued with loving devotion ('ibādat) and recognizes in Him the sole object of worship (*ma'būd*). Thus, devotion represents the key mode for the rightful believer (*mu'min*) in establishing a relationship between his immanent

degree of reality as creature and the transcendent Reality of the Deity. It finds its utmost expression in the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) the importance of which is summed up in the formula inscribed in the *miḥrāb* of many Indian mosques: *al-ṣalāt mi'rāj al-mu'minīn!* (Ritual prayer implies the heavenly ascent of those qualified by true inner faith!) And Allāh decreed in the Qur'ān: *I have not created jinn and mankind except to worship Me!* (Cor. 51:56). There derives that in the religious perspective set out by the *sharī'a* worshiping and serving God means putting oneself in harmony with the almighty Deity whereby all creatures achieve their purpose in creation and ultimately attain to salvation in the afterlife (in principle, worship does not remain confined to human beings alone!).

In the initiatory perspective of *tasawwuf*, the devotional mode inherent to the concept of *'ibādat* is inserted into a broader context and offers those following the Sufi path the possibility of direct participation in God's transcendent nature. The Sufis worldview envisages the possibility of establishing a deep, personal bond between man and God as a consequence of the intimate relationship subsisting since time immemorial between the Creator and His creation, as hinted at in the Tradition: *If it had not been out of love for you, oh Muḥammad, I would not have created the world!* Love (*ḥubb* or *maḥabbat*), it appears, is understood as the primordial impulse and moving force out of which the world came into being in the first place and through the power of which, in the reverse process put in act by those initiated into the Divine mysteries, the true lovers of God will ultimately dissolve and extinguish themselves (*fanā al-fanā*). As a renowned *shaikh* of the Indian Naqshbandi order in Delhi some years ago explained: *Love means to establish an intimate relationship of the heart with whosoever for the sake of reaching the most exalted Allāh.*

Thus, for the Sufis *'ibādat* articulates itself through love and acts as the driving force which enables the initiate into the *ṭarīqa* to advance from the outer dimension represented by the normative Law of the *sharī'a* to the innermost core and spiritual Principle of universal existence, known as *ḥaqīqa*. If the *sharī'a* sets out the rules for correct action and belief in terms of orthopraxy and orthodoxy in the immanent world, the secrets of *ḥaqīqa* pertaining to the transcendent can be understood essentially through knowledge (*ma'rifat*). In order to

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effectively connect these two poles of universal existence, every *ṭarīqa* combines all three modes, that is action, devotion and knowledge into a spiritual discipline with the purpose of transmuting the common believer ultimately into *insān al-kāmil*, the Perfect Man and archetypical principle of creation (*ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadī*), personified in the historical figure of the prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the ‘beloved of God’ (*maḥbūb Allāh*) *par excellence*. The binding element consists of that very devotional mode (*‘ibādat*) which is brought to a new life by the spiritual influence (*baraka*) the spiritual seeker (*murīd*) receives in virtue of his initiation (*bai‘at*). If outwardly supported by the operational mode determined through the ritual prescriptions of the *sharī‘at* and inwardly refined by the cognitive mode through the contemplative penetration into the secrets of *ḥaqīqat*, *‘ibādat* becomes effectively the fuel and power required for the inner transformation and sublimation of the subtle state (*nafs*). In fact, it is possible to say that devotion, expressed through an attitude of pure, selfless love, naturally pertains to the *nafs* and represents its noblest quality as it provides the link between the physical frame of the gross body (*jism*) responsible for action and the spiritual component (*rūḥ*) representing *ḥaqīqat* that resides in the heart (*qalb*).

This division reminds us very closely of the tripartition of *karma*, *bhakti* and *jñāna* contemplated as modes of attaining to union with the Divine (*yogā*) by the *Bhagavad-gīta* and perpetuated in the spiritual disciplines all over India well before the arrival of Islām. In principle, these three modes are recognized as essential and complementary; however, over time the devotional component kept strengthening gradually assuming the key role it has held for the past many centuries. It surely represents an important element in the perception of human nature, which could be easily shared not only by Hindu and Muslim initiates alike but also among the common folk since it represents an element conducive to unity and harmony in the social sphere too. It is probably more than a mere coincidence that it is in the reverence and veneration shown for the figure of the spiritual preceptor in the shape of the *gurū* or *shaikh* that sufis and *sants* of the *nirguna bhakti* current spontaneously identified a point of convergence for their spiritual traditions centred on devotion, for their teachings, focused essentially on the worship of the unqualified, transcendent Principle, left both with

the need to provide their adepts with a tangible receptacle of Divine influence and object on which to direct their devotional feelings.

In fact, different from the common *Muslim* whose worship in virtue of his faith remains confined to an abstract and all-transcendent Divinity, the initiate into a *ṭarīqa* has the possibility to focus and kindle his love and devotion on a perceptible object. Although the Sufis agree that all acts of ritual worship are directed in the last instance on that most sublime, all-transcending degree of Reality described as *al-Ḥaqq*, the ever increasing distance from the 'living pole' of divine perfection that was Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), created the need to provide those in search of Truth with some supplementary support in the shape of a representative (*khalīfa*) of that Truth (*ḥaqīqa*). In *tarīqa*-Sufism, the most immediately approachable figuration of *ḥaqīqa* is represented by the *murshid bar Ḥaqq*, the spiritual master whose role, as the term suggests, is to lead his devoted follower along the path of realization (*ṭarīqa*) towards its ultimate Goal (*maqṣūd*). As the last and immediate link of the spiritual chain (*silsila*) which through generations of past authorities eventually leads back to Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and his intrinsic spiritual truth (*ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadī*) and, in the last instance, to the Divine principle Itself, he represents the perfect guide (*shaykh al-kāmil*) and tangible embodiment of *ḥaqīqa*, *hic et nunc*. Outwardly, he acts as a substitute and generational successor of the prophet while inwardly he is the custodian of *ḥaqīqat al-muḥammadī*, the spiritual principle of creation, which is considered as the link (*barzakḥ*) between God and the world.

The *shaikh* thus becomes the outer support connecting between the transcendent with the immanent and *viceversa* (*wasīla*) through his physical presence at the centre of the spiritual circle of devotees (*ṣuḥbat* or *ḥalqa*). All the apologetic rhetoric of numerous Sufi authorities notwithstanding, the *shaikh* came to act virtually and effectively as a representative of God on earth. This is exactly the reason why Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624), the Indian Naqshbandi authority renowned as *mujaddid* (*renewer*) for his reformulation of the Sufi *ṭarīqa* in the light of *sharī'a*, perfectly aware of the increasing importance of the mediating role of the *shaikh*, so much insisted on the need for the spiritual teacher to act and speak in perfect imitation of the example set by the prophet Muḥammad (*ittibā'*

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*al-sunna*). It comes therefore as no surprise if even an orthodox Sunni order like the Mujaddidiyya, the Indian branch of the Central-Asian Naqshbandiyya, which takes its name and fashion from Shaikh Ahmad, teaches its adepts the technique of *taṣawwur al-shaikh*, viz. the visualization of the physical frame of the master through *tawajjuh*. This latter implies the kindling of the disciple's mental attention on the figure of the beloved spiritual preceptor and, *viceversa*, the focusing of the *shaikh*'s spiritual attention on his disciple with the purpose of fostering the inner states of the beloved pupil. The aim of this practice is to achieve *rābiṭa*, an intimate bond between the inner states of the neophyte and the *shaikh* by which, to put it in the words of Shāh Abū al-Ḥasan Zaid Fārūqī, "the shaikh nourishes the feeling of love in the innermost chamber of the initiate's heart". Gradually, this process increases the intensity of the *murīd*'s love and attraction eventually leading to his surrender and extinction in the beloved spiritual teacher (*fanā fī'l-shaikh*). The attraction thus generated (*jadhba*) literally causes an emotional upset in the inner states of the disciple leading him from his ordinary human condition to the submersion in the powerful spiritual current that, channelled through the intermediate link (*wasīla*) of his *shaikh*, pulls him upwards onto a spiritual journey (*sair*) which has its utmost limits in the realm of creation at the Throne of God (*al-'arsh*). The Sufis of the Mujaddidiyya explain this powerful attraction as being caused by the affinity in nature between the spiritual power hidden in seminal form (*aṣlī quwwat*) in the subtle organs inside the human body and their principles pertaining to the transcendent reality of the *'ālam al-amr*.

From a technical point of view, through the *rābiṭa* between master and disciple the former infuses the spiritual energy (*baraka*) he is endowed with in virtue of his link with the very source of all Divine effusions (*ain al-fuyūd-i ilāhī*) onto the heart region of his disciple. This heart region (*maqām-i sīna*) is envisaged by the Mujaddidis as an aggregate of five subtle centres (*laṭā'if al-khamsa*) which guarantee the potential bond between man in the realm of creation and his Creator, a kind of subtle imprint of the primordial bond between the Lord and His creatures. At a subtle level, these *laṭā'if* resume the principles of the four gross elements constituting the substantial world represented by the four corners of cardinal points of the macrocosm (*'ālam al-kabīr*).



The powerful impact caused by the kindled spiritual energy creates a commotion in those subtle centres which, as it increases, eventually expand until they burst out of their restricted location in the human breast thereby generating a current of powerful attraction (*jadhba*). The emotional impact thus created causes the initiate to experience a 'journey through the horizons' (*sair-i āfāqī*) leading him through the spatial dimension determined by the four cardinal points of the created world towards the point of resolution at the top of the pyramid thus described. This latter consists of the *nafs* and represents the *barzakh* through which those who are qualified can proceed further thus accessing the spiritual realm. The passage through this intermediate link is described as an entirely interior journey (*sair-i anfusī*), in accordance with the Qur'anic dictum: *We shall show them Our signs in the horizons and in themselves* (Cor. 49:53) and will conduct the initiate through the celestial realms of the spiritual world. From this moment onwards, every progress would therefore more appropriately be termed as 'immotion'.

In the Mujaddidi version of *ṭarīqa* this initial process is fueled by the loving care of the *shaikh* who, in response to the devotion and affection shown by his pupil, infuses the Divine grace (*faiḍ*) of which he has become a natural receptacle in virtue of his spiritual perfection, onto the inner states of the *murīd*. Thus, once again emerges the substituting role played by the spiritual teacher as an actor acting in accordance with the will of God (*irāda*), for this Latter is reported to have once confided to his beloved prophet: *Whoever draws close to me by the length of a hand, I will draw close to him by the length of an arm. Whoever draws close to me the by length of an arm, I will draw close to him by the length of a fathom. Whoever comes to me walking, I will come to him running ...*<sup>13</sup>

However, it must be borne in mind that this attraction can be equally produced, or further strengthened, through the active pursue on behalf of the initiate of directing the *dhikr-i ism-i dhāt*, the subtle sound contained in the sacred syllable describing the Divine principle itself, i.e. *Al-lāh* (or, alternatively, a series of other Divine names), which is

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<sup>13</sup> Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim 2687.

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transmitted by the spiritual director as an essential part of his initiation, onto the subtle centres of the new adept into the Sufi path. In this case, the task consists of transmitting the subtle vibration of the *dhikr* to the *laṭīfa* in question until this latter is permeated by the very subtle sound vibration contained in the *dhikr*. The powerful impact (*ḍarb*) the *dhikr* provokes an emotional tension in the *laṭīfa*, leading to a gradual expansion of the latter until resounding in the entire physical frame of the physical body (*qālib*) and every single hair, bone and vein keeps reverberating by the sound Al-lāh Al-lāh. In fact, according to the teachings of most Sufi orders, this awakening of a powerful attraction is caused principally by the active striving (*mujāhada*) of the initiate as part of his spiritual advancement on the path (*sulūk*) leading from stage to stage (*maqām ba maqām*).

It thus becomes clear how some Sufis intend emotions (*jadhbāt*) as an essential characteristic and key mode for spiritual advancement, parallel and complementary to the process of (*sulūk*). In a profane perspective, emotions are born out of the impact left by the sensual perceptions the mind receives through contact with the realm of creation which necessarily leads back towards the ephemeral multiplicity whence they are derived from. It is through love alone that, albeit in a worldly context, even the profane can share into the ennobling experience of directing his emotions on the sole object of his attentions and desires, the beloved. As for the profane or for that matter the Christian mystics, for the initiate too these emotions are provoked by impressions left by a sensual or mental experience. However, in the initiatory perspective of *ṭarīqa* the principal objective of which is the attainment of *tawḥīd*, the powerful emotions arising out of love (*‘ishq*) are provoked and channelled by the spiritual force (*quwwat al-‘ishq*) that creates a movement in a precisely defined direction, leading the initiate from one spiritual state to another. Through this movement, which in the language of *ṭarīqa* is termed as the advancement from one spiritual state (*ḥāl*) to the next, the lover of the Divine (*‘āshiq*) is ultimately led to witness and meet his Divine lover (*ma‘shūq*), i.e. Allāh.

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