

Who is a Sufi?

by Nyla Ashraf

Whether Sufism is a strictly Islamic approach to mysticism or not is a point of debate among Western scholars less debatable is that the first historical traces of Sufism as a mystical path appeared within two centuries of the founding of Islam in the seventh century A.D. Significantly, Sufis were generally accepted and respected within their surrounding communities. Thus their mysticism was seen as an extension and deepening of Islamic practice.

Sufism as a whole was allowed to flourish and in many cases traveling Sufis were influential in introducing Islam to new cultures. Sufi's are Muslim mystics who trace their spiritual lineage to the great prophet Mohammad, the founder of Islam. Like all mystics, Sufi's are not concerned with secondhand knowledge about God, but with personal experience of God.

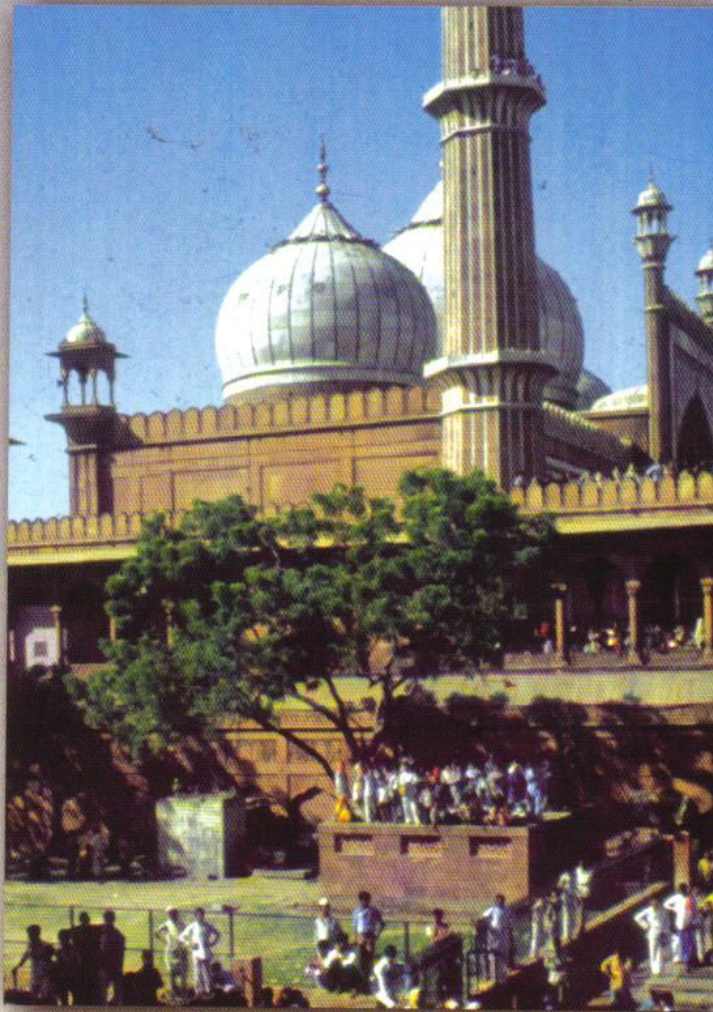
"I define the word *sūfī* in wide terms by applying it to anyone who believes that it is possible to have direct experience of God and who is prepared to go out of his way to put himself in a state whereby he may be enabled to do this. Many will not be happy about this definition, but I find it the only possible way to embrace all the varieties of people involved in the orders." **Trimingham, J.S.**

In view of this quote by Trimingham, J.S. It appears that for Sufis, the outer forms of religion were merely vehicles for the spiritual content that lies beyond all rites and creeds. The sufi sage Shibli is said to have run the streets carrying flaming coals announcing he was going to set fire to the Ka'aba, the most sacred place in Islam so that Muslims would concern themselves less with a place and more with the Lord of the Ka'aba. Such enthusiasm for truth has often caused Sufis to be branded as heretics and horribly persecuted by orthodox Islamic authorities. Yet their wisdom has survived to inspire generations of spiritual seekers. Sufism is simply about seeing things as they truly are - a mystical realization that is available to all. The true mystic is not a devotee lost in ecstatic communion or a reclusive saint who avoids others. The true mystic lives alongside other people. "Sufism took seed directly from Islam, was nurtured by it and has reached

maturity in Islam. Sufism has been called the soul of Islam, its mystical flower." (Schimmel, 1976). Sufism is an intrinsic part of Islam and the Chishti Qadhiri sufi order or tradition is widely present all over the world (concentrated a lot in the subcontinent of India & Pakistan) and is fast catching up in the west. Sufism

courage and guidance to the afflicted humanity irrespective of caste creed or religion.

The Making of a Sufi: Suluk: the spiritual journey; this brings us to say something about the Sufi discipline. The first and foremost requirement is the purification of the soul. **The carnal soul:** In the first



is the way towards the knowledge of our Self and our relation with our Lord. A Sufi will be distinguishable from others on account of his detachment from his parents, children, wealth, power, position and comforts. His ignorance vanishes in the effulgence. A Sufi saint is a Spiritual King, far above all temporal kings, disguised in the patched robes of a humble dervish. Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chisty (R.A) (May peace of God be upon his soul) was one of the greatest Sufi saints the world has ever known. His spiritual influence and benedictions have been and are still a perpetual source of inspiration

stage one struggles against the carnal soul or *nafs al-ammara* as it is called by the Sufis. *Nafs al-ammara* is the tendency in man to disobey God and to take pleasure in evil deed and thought.

The reproaching soul: When he has subjugated the carnal soul, *nafs al-ammara*, the Sufi enters upon the second stage of purification in which he is able to respond readily to the call of the reproaching soul which is called *nafs al-lawwama*. **The contented soul:** After this stage has become firmly established in him the Sufi enters the third stage which is known as the station of the

contented soul, *nafs al-mutma'inna*. In this stage the Sufi develops to the fullest the tendency to obey God and to act in perfect harmony with His commandments. **"Meditation, ecstasy, states, stations and ascension.** The various stages on the mystical path are known as *maqamat*, or the 'stations', which can be reached by any Sufi by means of prayer, fasting, meditation, and the *hal* or 'mystical state', which may be vouchsafed to the Sufi by the Grace of God but is not attainable by the mystic's own efforts.

Extinction (*fana*) and subsistence (*baqa*): One of the important phases of mystical experience which is attained by the Grace of God by a travelers on the mystical path is the state of *fana fi Allah*, 'extinction of the self in God'

As the great Persian Sufi poet, Hafiz of Shiraz,

"He whose heart is alive with love, never dies." "The unity of the Sufis is the integration of paradoxes and ontological contrasts; it is the union of all the diverse qualities which characterize the order of multiplicity" So said. Nasr, S.H. :

The pseudo-Sufis Over the centuries, as the Sufi orders grew; the Sufi masters were generally recognized as sages and men of wisdom and grace enjoying the esteem of the general populace. The growing social prestige of the Sufis attracted self-seekers who posed as Sufis and dervishes and embarked upon the exploitation of the goodwill of the people.

Above all else Sufis prize sincerity, and one approaching a teacher with an open heart and sincere intent is not likely to be turned away while Sufism is rightfully proud of the unbroken chain of saints and masters though whom its teachings and methods have been passed every worthwhile teacher has met the challenge of finding new ways to present that heritage within the context of their time and place.

Abu Muhammad Muta'ish says: "The Sufi is he whose thought keeps pace with his foot.

There are so many ways for the human ego to usurp even the purest spiritual values. The true Sufi is the one who makes no claims to virtue or truth but who lives a life of presence and selfless love. Remembering God is the beginning of remembering ourselves.