

Tasawwuf

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The following article is an edited transcript of an English talk on Tasawwuf given by Dr. Manzoor-uddin Ahmed in Fremont, California on April 6, 2003. Professor Dr. Manzoor-uddin Ahmed is a distinguished Professor at Columbia University, former Vice Chancellor of the University of Karachi, and a renowned scholar and researcher of Islamic Political Systems. He has authored several books, which have been translated into different languages including Arabic. Among his works are the following: "Islamic Political Systems in the Modern Age: Theory and Practice", "Pakistan: The Emerging Islamic State", and "Contemporary Pakistan".

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

The basic concept of mysticism in Islam is to know oneself and to know one's Creator. As the Hadith says:

“Whoever knows himself, knows his Lord.”

It is through this process that one discovers the unity in man.

The awliya-ikram (Noble Friends of Allah) and ulema-ikram (Noble Scholars of Islam) should not traverse different paths leading to different directions but they should meet at the Straight Path – the siraat al-mustaqeem and hand in hand create in man the consciousness of the soul and the body.

Selflessness is the substance of Tasawwuf. Self-discipline is used to raise oneself above oneself and identify oneself with the Divine Self. There is no dichotomy between Tareeqat and Shariat. Shariat refers to a code of cosmic laws that governs the entire universe. The Milky Way, the planets, the sky, and the outer space, which seem endless, nevertheless have an end. The immensity of God's creation is felt through observing these creations. Through this feeling, one realizes and feels the Creator. Allah Almighty created this universe and the entire universe appears static. There is no conflict; instead there is order and cosmic & universal harmony. The planets don't fall apart. They are sustained in harmony, which governs the entire universe. It is this harmony, which reproduced through Divine guidance in the form of a code of human conduct is called Shariat. Therefore, Shariat is the cosmic law that sustains harmony in the entire universe, which is revealed to the Prophets who bring this code to humanity. The aim and purpose of this code of conduct is to create inner and psychic harmony. Once this inner harmony has been achieved, it is to be externalized into a code of external conduct in the form of obligations to Allah Almighty. The entire purpose is to externalize the inner harmony in individual as well as social life or community living. This is Shariat. The custodians of the Shariat are the ulema whose job is to interpret the Law in such a manner that continuity and change can both go in harmony with each other, so that man can traverse the Path of truth in order to reach his ultimate reality, i.e. the Divine Will. That is the external Shariat. In order to preserve this inner and external harmony through Shariat, the soul must play its role.

Man is the noblest creation of Allah Almighty. This description is attributed to man, despite the fact that man was created from dust, because Allah Almighty infused His own Spirit into this creation distinguishing humans from the rest of creation. There are billions of forms of living creatures in the world from the dinosaurs down to the present age that are all living in the sense that they can grow and decay and go to dust. So, the vitality of life is one thing that is common to all these living creatures. However, apart from this vitality of the living character, man is noblest because Allah Almighty has

infused His Spirit into him. With this Spirit, man becomes raised to the higher level of creation becoming noblest of all mankind. The body is like a dark cage of which the soul is a part. So everyone becomes a part and parcel of the Divine Soul; everyone is born with this.

There are two ways that man can conduct himself in a manner that he is able to seek purification of body and soul. This is possible only if one can harness the body in service of the soul. If someone is able to harness the body and control it and the soul governs the body, then they are on the right path. However, if the body takes control of the soul and the soul becomes the slave, then it leads to a path, which ultimately ends in sharr (evil). Sharr and khayr (good) are both created by God.

The first of the two ways to seek purification is following the Spiritual Guide. The purpose of Tasawwuf, and the secret of Tasawwuf is the guide without whom one cannot achieve anything. Practicing Tasawwuf without a guide leads to spiritual and intellectual anarchy, and one may go astray. Therefore the role of the guide is paramount, is central, and is key. If one wants to do it on one's own, one may go into animated suspense. There are people who try to achieve this without a guide and are found roaming around half mad or even fully mad; they are called majzoob. Majzoob is one who is permanently in a state of jazb and unable to come out of that state of coma because of the lack of a guide who can bring him back. Therefore, the role of the guide is absolutely necessary.

Unfortunately, there has developed in the modern age an ideology against the need for a spiritual guide, because of the promotion of the ideology of extreme individualism through the intellect and rationalism. This individualism is divorced from spirit and interrupts the integration of the soul and the body. It is only Divine guidance that can lead one to the right course. Intellect without Divine light leads to a course, which can be described as intellectual anarchy and spiritual chaos. Today man is becoming more scientific and rational and feels he can achieve anything without guidance. There is a very interesting couplet by Jigar Muradabadi:

*Jahle khirat ne din ye dikhae
Ghat gae insaan badh gae saae*

Ignorance of the intellect has shown the days
That humanity has decreased and shadows (falsehood) have increased

Man has today developed weapons of mass destruction and nuclear weapons. The same energy could be devoted to promoting welfare of the people, which could balance poverty, and bring about absolute peace in the world. However, the ruling classes and elites use intellect in the wrong way. Instead, people need to use their God given intellect to find the right Spiritual Guide and then follow him to the Divine.

The second way to seek purification is that one must be able to through the guide control oneself. The body is impulsive. It has certain basic needs. If man becomes a prisoner of his impulses, he is an animal. However, through the help of the guide when man uses his own Divine Light to fight the darkness of jahl (ignorance), then it is the light of the spirit that prevails. This can be achieved only through self-discipline and self-purification and regulation of external conduct through observing the Shariat. Man's body is a dark chamber and the soul is the light. If the body controls, the light fades away. But when the body is under control, the light keeps burning keeping one ahead and above all the caprices and vices of materialism. When this external regulation and spiritual purification are both in harmony with each other, then one can be in a position to say that one has reached a point when one can start one's sojourn of the soul toward the ultimate i.e. self realization and realization of the love of God.

Islam is the synthesis or the possibility of integration of Tareeqat and Shariat. Tasawwuf is not about asceticism (although some influence of Christian and Hindu asceticism has seeped into Islamic Tasawwuf causing some deviation to occur), but is an inseparable marriage of Tareeqat & Shariat. It is this version of Tasawwuf, which focuses on ones role in the community that we live. People are generally good. But if they become prisoners of their self, their impulses, in that case they are in a state of coma and do harmful things to the society, individual or community. It is our responsibility that wherever we may be we must present the truth of Islam to our surrounding communities through our individual and social conduct, virtuous life and through our words and profession, presenting a role mode of Islam.

It is interesting to note that it was the Sufia ikram who were able to preach Islam in a lasting way. If one observes the places that both the rulers and the ulema went to, for instance in the example of Spain, the rulers ruled there for 800-900 years but they were turned out of the Iberian Peninsula and there were no Muslims left, just the Islamic architecture and mosques, with no imam and no muqtadi. This is because of the fact that the ruling classes went there and the ulema-e-su (corrupt scholars) justified their expansion and did not commit themselves to presenting a role model of Islam or a true Muslim. So now there is no Muslim presence left there at all, except for architecture. But wherever the Sufia ikram went, despite the fact that the rulers were there and the ulema were there in the courts, even after the decline of the empires, the Muslim presence stayed in far off lands such as Fiji, Philippines, Jakarta, Thailand, China, etc. This proves that the Sufia ikram knew that they would not be able to change the government and therefore established a parallel spiritual government to bring about harmony in the people and sustain the spiritual unity of the community, which was disrupted by the ruling classes. They were divided into provinces and countries with the abdal, qutub etc. some were sent to South East Asia others to other places, their job being to bring harmony among the people through their conduct. The reason the Muslim presence continued in the inner recesses of these lands is because of the Sufia ikram who had

integrated the soul and the body, the Shariat and the Tareeqat with their conduct. Also, these awliya were shown things from the future but they were not allowed to disclose these unless a certain situation called for the display of a karamat (miracle) to prove a point to people who didn't believe. They stayed away from authority and the ruling elite and never sought their support or courtship. They went into the recesses of these lands and preached Islam to the people as a mission of peace. Their laps were open to everyone. They reinforced the faith of the Muslims, to keep the light of the soul burning in the dark chamber of the body. And invited people of other faiths to profess and practice peace internally and externally as a good Muslim by submitting themselves to the Will of God. Wherever the Sufia went, Islam thrived. Even after their death, their mazars (burial tombs) became the point of convergence like the Data Darbar in Lahore, Pakistan, and Ajmer Sharif in India. So although historically, ulema have relegated the Sufis to be deviants, the impact the Sufia ikram have had in terms of the lasting Muslim presence, is very significant.

Those who propagate that Islam means death, terrorism, these are accretions, not the substance of the faith. Islam has never preached these. Jihad in Islam in the form of qitaal (killing) is only in self-defense. And this is only one form of jihad. The greatest jihad or jihad-e-akbar is to enable one's soul to control one's body, i.e. self-discipline. This is the substance of Islam. Once this is understood, one can never try to kill the innocent, the womenfolk and the other vulnerable components of society, which is absolutely prohibited. In addition, Islam prohibits initiation of aggression. To reiterate, Islam allows jihad only in self defense and that too as a last resort. The Quran talks about the two categories of fasad-fil-ardh (violence on earth) and jihad-fi-sabeeliLlah (struggle in Allah's path). Fasad refers to the activities of those misguided people who prefer to follow the path of satan and therefore run amuck and indulge in violent activities. Violence is not the purpose of Islam and neither is it the purpose to achieve things through violence. The concept of fasad-fil-ardh has been categorically condemned in Islam as stated in the Quran.

It is therefore the Sufia ikram or Sufi orders who can really present the message of Islam in the correct way. Ordinary individuals (who have committed themselves to a Sufi order) can do this if they commit to conducting themselves in a peaceful manner. God has created the Universe and created harmony within it and therefore the purpose is to create harmony within us, outside ourselves, in society, amongst each other, in the family, in groups, and in the entire society. There are tremendous possibilities in our communities today, especially in the West that with the right guide and by our conduct we can tell other people that Islam does not mean fasad. Islam has condemned killing and aggression just for the conquest of land. The verses in the Quran that talk about jihad make it clear that jihad is justified only for certain circumstances and unjustified war is unlawful.

The youth of the west are victims of a spiritual void and are reverting to old religions and traditions such as the Hare Krishna groups and other primitive cults or are trying to fill the void with the temporary and destructive highs of intoxicants. There is much opportunity to show them the correct path. One way is to theoretically explain this to people. However, the more effective way is to prove this to people through one's conduct. This will give the message to the people around, some of who may hate us, to start loving us and in this way Islam will spread. Some practical ways are that in individual, family and community living, one must invite people of other faiths as well to see whether we are indulging in acts of terrorism or worship? Also, we must share our experiences with those who don't belong to us. We must also, through our organizations, writings, conventions, bring the people who represent true Islam. Unfortunately in today's world the ulema-e-su are rampant. There are as many Islams as there are groups of ulema. On the other hand, Sufis are open to everyone. They are not exclusive; they are inclusive. We must try to bring those people together who are really practicing Muslims and Sufis. The real test is are they doing it for the sake of Allah or for some ulterior worldly gains? A true Sufi is one who is there for the spiritual benefit of people regardless of any condition he or she may be in, without seeking money or any worldly benefits for himself or herself. And, 'ijz (humility, brokenness) is the highest quality of a true Sufi. When one meets a Sufi, one feels one is meeting anonymity. But as one is exposed to them more frequently, one sees that they are a source of light. One must promote and cooperate with all such groups who are trying to preach Islam through their individual and social conduct and the Sufi orders or Tasawwuf. If we are successful in doing this, the 21st century is God willing going to be the century of Tasawwuf where the best tradition of the Sufis of promoting peace among the people as a source of spiritual emancipation will be widespread.

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