

What Is Sufism?

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Sufism has been defined in many ways. Some see it as God's annihilating the individual's ego, will, and self-centeredness and then reviving him or her spiritually with the lights of His Essence. Such a transformation results in God's directing the individual's will in accordance with His Will. Others view it as a continuous striving to cleanse one's self of all that is bad or evil in order to acquire virtue.

Junayd al-Baghdadi, a famous Sufi master, defines Sufism as a method of recollecting "self-annihilation in God" and "permanence or subsistence with God." Shibli summarizes it as always being together with God or in His presence, so that no worldly or other-worldly aim is even entertained. Abu Muhammad Jarir describes it as resisting the temptations of the carnal self and bad qualities, and acquiring laudable moral qualities.

There are some who describe Sufism as seeing behind the "outer" or surface appearance of things and events and interpreting whatever happens in the world in relation to God. This means that a person regards every act of God as a window to "see" Him, lives his life as a continuous effort to view or "see" Him with a profound, spiritual "seeing" indescribable in physical terms, and with a profound awareness of being continually overseen by Him.

All of these definitions can be summarized as follows: Sufism is the path followed by an individual who, having been able to free himself or herself from human vices and weaknesses in order to acquire angelic qualities and conduct pleasing to God, lives in accordance with the requirements of God's knowledge and love, and in the resulting spiritual delight that ensues.

Sufism is based on observing even the most "trivial" rules of the Shari'a in order to penetrate their inner meaning. An initiate or traveler on the path (salik) never separates the outer observance of the Shari'a from its inner dimension, and therefore observes all of the requirements of both the outer and the inner dimensions of Islam. Through such observance, he or she travels toward the goal in utmost humility and submission.

Sufism, being a demanding path leading to knowledge of God, has no room for negligence or frivolity. It requires the initiate to strive continuously, like a honeybee flying from the hive to flowers and from flowers to the hive, to acquire this knowledge. The initiate should purify his or her heart from all other attachments; resist all carnal inclinations, desires, and appetites; and live in a manner reflecting the knowledge with which God has revived and illumined his or her heart, always ready to receive divine blessing and inspiration, as well as in strict observance of the Prophet Muhammad's example. Convinced that attachment and adherence to God is the greatest merit and honor, the initiate should renounce his or her own desires for the demands of God, the Truth.

After these [preliminary] definitions, we should discuss the aim, benefits, and principles of Sufism.

Sufism requires the strict observance of all religious obligations, an austere lifestyle, and the renunciation of carnal desires. Through this method of spiritual self-discipline, the individual's heart is purified and his or her senses and faculties are employed in the way of God, which means that the traveler can now begin to live on a spiritual level.

Sufism also enables individuals, through the constant worship of God, to deepen their awareness of themselves as devotees of God. Through the renunciation of this transient, material world, as well as the desires and emotions it engenders, they awaken to the reality of the other world, which is turned toward God's Divine Beautiful Names. Sufism allows individuals to develop the moral dimension of one's existence, and enables the acquisition of a strong, heartfelt, and personally experienced conviction of the articles of faith that before had only been accepted superficially.

The principles of Sufism may be listed as follows:

- Reaching true belief in God's Divine Oneness and living in accordance with its demands.
- Heeding the Divine Speech (the Qur'an), discerning and then obeying the commands of the Divine Power and Will as they relate to the universe (the laws of creation and life).
- Overflowing with Divine Love and getting along with all other beings in the realization (originating from Divine Love) that the universe is a cradle of brotherhood.
- Giving preference or precedence to the well-being and happiness of others.
- Acting in accord with the demands of the Divine Will not with the demands of our own will and living in a manner that reflects our self-annihilation in God and subsistence with Him.
- Being open to love, spiritual yearning, delight, and ecstasy.
- Being able to discern what is in hearts or minds through facial expressions and the inner, Divine mysteries and meanings of surface events.
- Visiting spiritual places and associating with people who encourage the avoidance of sin and striving in the way of God.
- Being content with permitted pleasures, and not taking even a single step toward that which is not permitted.
- Struggling continuously against worldly ambitions and illusions, which lead us to believe that this world is eternal.
- Never forgetting that salvation is possible only through certainty or conviction of the truth of religious beliefs and conduct, sincerity or purity of intention, and the sole desire to please God.

Two other elements may be added: acquiring knowledge and understanding of the religious and gnostic sciences, and following a perfected, spiritual master's guidance. Both of these are of considerable significance in the Naqshbandiyah Sufi order.

It may be useful to discuss Sufism according to the following basic concepts, which often form the core of books written on good morals, manners, and asceticism, and which are viewed as the sites of the "Muhammadan Truth" in one's heart. They can also be considered lights by which to know and follow the spiritual path leading to God.

The first and foremost of these concepts is wakefulness (yaqaza), which is alluded to in the Prophetic saying (hadith): My eyes sleep but my heart does not, and in the saying of 'Ali, the fourth Caliph: Men are asleep. They wake up when they die. The many other stages on this path will be discussed, at some length, in this book.