

## THE TAO OF SUFISM

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The word Sufism refers to a range of theories and practices that have been present in one form or another within the Islamic tradition from its inception.<sup>1)</sup> More than manifestations of Islam, Sufism formulates a clear theory of human perfection and provides the means whereby this can be achieved. In what follows, I will attempt to extract from a vast and complex literature the basic Sufi understanding of the human situation and the theoretical underpinnings of the path that must be followed if human health and wholeness are to be achieved.<sup>2)</sup>

The fundamental teaching upon which all Islamic understanding is built is the statement, "There is no god but God." This formula is known as the "sentence that declares unity" (kalimat al-tawhîd). Every Muslim accepts that it is true, but there is a vast diversity of understandings as to exactly what it means. In fact, the intellectual history of Islamic civilization can be read as a series of commentaries on the meanings and implications of this statement.

In general, Muslims understand the formula of unity as a declaration that everything in existence manifests a single principle, which we can refer to as "God" or "the Real" (al-haqq). Everything that appears in the universe comes from the Real and returns to the Real. The appearance of all things, their subsistence, and their subsequent disappearance manifest the attributes and properties of the Real. The Real brings the universe into existence in keeping with its own inherent characteristics. One of the primary characteristics of the Real is that in itself it is unknowable and inexpressible. Only its manifestations are knowable. Its manifestations are those of its own qualities and characteristics that it chooses to display. In a similar way, the universe, inasmuch as it partakes of the characteristics of the Real, is unknowable in itself. However, it is knowable inasmuch as it is shown to us. Hence Islamic understanding is built upon the fundamental assumption that there is a deep, underlying ignorance that permeates all conscious beings, with the sole exception of the Real itself, which has an absolute awareness of self and others.

The Real shows itself through everything that appears, whatever may be the modality of appearance. The innumerable modalities of the Real's self-showing provide the context within which a certain limited understanding of the Real and the cosmos can be established. The modalities of the Real's appearance and self-disclosure are often brought together into two basic categories that are given a variety of names. On the mythic and imagistic level, these two categories are sometimes called "the two hands of

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God." In theological terms, they are named "majesty and beauty," or "wrath and mercy." In metaphysical terms, they are typically called "the assertion of incomparability (*tanzîh*)" and "the declaration of similarity (*tashbîh*)." In Chinese terms, one might call them "heaven and earth," or "yang and yin."<sup>31</sup>

When the Real shows itself through yang attributes, it is perceived as majestic, mighty, immense, distant, overpowering, and wrathful. The Real is utterly beyond any of its manifestations. Hence, next to the Real, the universe is insignificant, if not actually nothing. Everything in the universe—and the universe itself—is totally incomparable with the Real.

When the Real shows itself through yin attributes, it is perceived as beautiful, gentle, loving, near, compassionate, and merciful. From this point of view, the Real is present in all of its manifestations. Hence the universe is precious and full of significance, for it is the self-disclosure of the Real. Everything in the cosmos is similar to the Real inasmuch as it finds its existence and reality through the manifestation of the Real.

When we look at the universe and our own existence within the universe, we see partial and incomplete disclosures of the Real. Some things show themselves as distant from the Real, some as near to it; some things display beauty, others majesty. However, in the whole of reality, there are three things that manifest—or have the potential to manifest—the Real in the fullness of its self-disclosure. First is the universe as a whole, in all its never-ending spatial and temporal expanse. Second is the human being in the fullness of perfection and actuality. Third is the wisdom that comes from the Real through seers and sages.

The Real cannot be known in itself. It can only be known as it shows itself. The full self-disclosure of the Real is known to the cosmos as a whole, but each part of the cosmos knows only a fragment of this self-disclosure. Each part's knowledge of things is typically so limited that we do not even recognize it as knowledge; nevertheless, knowledge of the Real's self-disclosure defines the manifest reality of everything that exists. Human beings—or equivalent beings in other worlds—are unique within the universe because they alone have the potential to know the Real in the full range of its self-disclosure. Mythically, this is expressed by the idea that God created human beings with both hands, but he created other things with only one hand. It is also expressed by the common Islamic idea that God created the cosmos through speaking. Each thing represents one letter or word in the divine speech. The universe as a whole represents all of God's words. As for human beings, they represent the power of articulation through which every word can be voiced. That is why they are defined as a "rational" or "speaking" (*nâtiq* in Arabic) animals—that is, living beings that can understand and articulate every word in the vocabulary of the Real.

In short, the cosmos in its entirety is the full manifestation of the Real, but it is infinitely deployed and differentiated. In contrast, the human being is also the full manifestation of the Real, but compressed and synthesized into a single individual through each member of the human race.

The cosmos as a whole, in its indefinite multiplicity, displays the differentiation, dispersion, and receptivity that reflect the Real's infinite potential for self-disclosure. The

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human being manifests the collectedness, wholeness, oneness, and activity of the Real. Human beings and cosmos are the two poles of the Real's manifestation and self-disclosure, each acting as a mirror for the other, but the indefinite multiplicity and dispersion of the cosmos finds its expression within human beings in the infinite, inward human potential for knowing and actualizing the qualities and characteristics of all things. Human beings can know everything in the universe, but the things of the cosmos cannot gain full knowledge of the human reality. Thus it is typically said that the human being is the spirit, while the cosmos is the body. Together they are a single reality, but humans are the active and conscious side, while the cosmos is receptive and relatively unconscious.

### The Disease

The cosmos is perfect simply by being what it is. In contrast, human beings have two modes of perfection that correlate with the two hands of God, the two fundamental characteristics of the Real—incomparability and similarity, or majesty and beauty.

In one respect, God is the Real and all things in the universe are the unreal. People are things like other things; they are what they are and can do nothing about it. They live in ignorance of their innermost nature and have no way to actualize the full range of the Real's infinite attributes that are latent within them. They live below themselves and find their own reality reflected not in the universe as a whole, but in those aspects of the universe that enter into their own experience and awareness. Hence they have an extremely limited understanding of the nature of things, an understanding that is constricted and confined by innumerable historical, social, cultural, and individual factors.

From this first standpoint, human perfection is no different from the perfection of anything else in the universe. It is simply to be one fragmentary thing among other fragmentary things. People are submitted to the Tao of the heavens and the earth and they have no way to alter their own situation, because it is what it must be. This perspective recognizes the overwhelming reality of the Real and the fact that nothing in existence can stand up to the Real. It correlates with the Real's incomparability, immensity, and infinity and with our own ignorance of and distance from the Real.

The second mode of perfection correlates with the Real's similarity and all the attributes that this similarity demands, including nearness to the Real, compassion, and mercy. From this point of view, it is permissible to speak of the Real in terms of human motivations, with the understanding that all human motivations can only appear as manifestations or distortions of the Real's motivations. Here we come to understand that the Real's underlying motivation is compassion toward everything that can possibly exist. When this compassion is directed toward human beings, it delineates a path that can be followed to achieve a second and uniquely human mode of perfection. Through the first mode of perfection, people have limited roles to play in the universe like all other things. Through the second mode, they can leave behind all the limitations that constrict

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and define the cosmic things and emerge into a oneness with the Real, a harmony and equilibrium that lets them see everything in the universe as a manifestation of the Real. It is this second mode of perfection that distinguishes human beings from all other things.

The compassion of the Real finds its most direct and obvious expression in the third full manifestation of the Real that was mentioned earlier. As I said, the first full manifestation of the Real is the cosmos, and the second is the human being. The third is wisdom, which comes from the Real without the distorting influence of human ignorance and informs people of their own innate oneness with the Real. According to the Islamic definition, wisdom (*hikma*) is an understanding and an awareness that puts everything in its proper place and allows for compassionate interaction with all things—mercy and compassion being the most direct human manifestations of the nearness and similarity of the Real. Wisdom may take any appropriate form, but most commonly it appears as prophets, sages, avatars, or buddhas, or as recited or written books.

Wisdom—the third manifestation of the Real—is the key to meaning and to human wholeness. The cosmos, by itself, is simply an infinite diversity of things. Human beings, by themselves, are ignorant of the nature of the cosmos, the things within it, and themselves. Even though people are capable of understanding various aspects or dimensions of reality without the help of the Real, they can never understand the whole or their own role as microcosmos of the whole without the intervention of the Real's wisdom. Human perfection depends upon knowing the whole, because it involves actualizing the principles of every self-disclosure of the Real, and these principles are not available to people through their own individual efforts. To have access to the independent discovery of these principles, people would need to have access to the whole universe in its infinite deployment. Hence only the Real's wisdom can allow them to see the whole and to follow the path that achieves the full realization of the whole.

In short, the human predicament, in and of itself, is ignorance. People do not know themselves and cannot know themselves without taking refuge in that direct manifestation of the Real's compassion that is known as "wisdom." It follows that, in the measure that people refuse to take refuge in the Real, they live apart from their own realities. They are ignorant, and this ignorance demands distance from the Real. The Real is the source of everything good, wholesome, joyful, balanced, compassionate, and wise. If people fail to live with the Real, they can only live with the unreal. The unreal is everything that is corrupt, partial, distorted, disturbed, painful, hateful, and ignorant. Nearness to the Real demands wholeness and happiness; distance from the Real demands partiality and suffering.

From the perspective of Sufism, all human beings are mentally ill, with the sole exception of those who have achieved the perfection that is rooted in the wisdom and compassion of the Real. The formula of unity declares that "There is no god but God." This means that there is nothing real but the Real. Given that wisdom and compassion are the fundamental modalities through which the Real discloses itself, this formula demands that there is no wisdom but the Real's wisdom, and there is no compassion but the Real's compassion. People can actualize and manifest wisdom and compassion only inasmuch as they are similar to the Real.

A famous saying of the prophet Muhammad expresses the fundamental aberration that defines the human race in its historical actuality: "Every child is born with the original disposition, but then its parents turn it into a Christian, a Jew, or a Zoroastrian." The key term here is "original disposition" (*fitra*). The Sufis understand it as a reference to the characteristic that sets human beings apart from all other things—the fact that they manifest the two hands of God. The Prophet is saying that every human being is born with the potential to know the Real in its full self-disclosure and to reach the second sort of perfection that was mentioned earlier, the specifically human perfection that allows them to live in complete harmony with the Real. However, the various social institutions of human provenance<sup>4</sup> distort that potential and lead to imbalance, disequilibrium, and suffering. The only path of wholeness and self-realization is to take refuge in wisdom, which, in the Islamic case, is represented by the Koran.

Mental illness as pathology was relatively rare in Islamic civilization, because the Islamic institutions were focused upon establishing equilibrium with the Real, and even a small amount of success in this effort sets up spheres of influence that serve to stabilize social and individual relationships. Certainly Islamic literature on what we now recognize as psychological disorders is minuscule compared to the literature that focuses upon human wholeness, or the integration of the individual into the wisdom and compassion of the Real. Most of this literature on wholeness, however, does not deal with these issues in the abstract manner of scholars. Rather, directives for embodying wisdom and compassion are couched in an enormous variety of relatively concrete forms, ranging from the Koran itself, to prayers and supplications, to story-telling, to poetry. The last of these has been the most popular form of literature throughout the Islamic world. It is no accident that the greatest and most widely enjoyed Muslim poets have represented the Sufi tradition—people such as Ibn al-Farid, Rumi, Hafiz, and Yunus Emre. Recitation of the supremely beautiful verses of these poets is itself an effective therapy for anyone who has an intuition of the human predicament.

### The Cure

The root cause of disequilibrium, dis-ease, and disease is ignorance. Everyone suffers from this disease, because everyone is limited, confined, and constricted by the existential conditions of the universe. Some people may be cured of this fundamental disease, but only through the initiative of the Real, which is the source of all wisdom and compassion. Human efforts to achieve a cure, unless grounded in the Real, simply complicate and intensify the disease.

People are ignorant because it is in the nature of things to be ignorant. Nothing is free of ignorance save the Real. More specifically, people know themselves through knowing other people and other things. They are born with an original disposition that allows them to know all things, which means in practice that they come to know what they experience. They form a self-identity in terms of the interaction between the self,

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with its infinite potential, and everything that presents itself to the self through the unfolding of daily existence. The net result is that people experience themselves as constricted and confined. They identify themselves with their own limited experience of self and other. They experience sensations, feelings, emotions, passions, and complex interactions of interior forces that are potentially as diverse, disconnected, and differentiated as the universe itself.

Only the wisdom of the Real can provide people with a center around which to establish an identity that will open up into true self-knowledge, which is the same as knowledge of the Real. The wisdom that is revealed by the Real, in the diversity of its forms, always includes a praxis that allows it to be embodied through activity. If wisdom is only theory, then it is not wisdom. Wisdom demands—in accordance with the definition offered earlier—the practical application of the theory to everyday life.

The self-knowledge that is the goal of theory and praxis removes ignorance of the nature of things, that is, of the modes in which the Real discloses itself. It does not, however, eliminate ignorance of the Real in itself. As the theological axiom puts it, "None knows the Real but the Real." As long as there is the slightest trace of the human self, then limitation, constriction, and ignorance will be present.

Removal of ignorance demands knowledge and awareness of self and other as they truly are. This knowledge allows people to see that everything other than the Real is a specific delimitation of the Real, one of an infinite number of never-ending and never-repeating self-disclosures of the Real. Thus each thing in the manifest and nonmanifest worlds—everything in heaven and earth—is understood as one specific thing that is a part of the whole, the whole being the totality of the self-disclosures of the Real. In contrast, when true self-knowledge is achieved, the self is experienced and perceived as nothing, that is, no specific thing. Every part of the universe is a delimited and defined thing, but the self, as the Sufis say, is "an ocean without shore."

Some Sufis explain the difference between the perfection of the cosmic things and the full perfection of the human self by employing the Koranic term *maqân*, which means "station" or "standing place." In the Koran, the angels are quoted as saying, "Each one of us has a known station" (37:164). So also, each thing in the universe, as a part of the whole, stands in a known station, that is a situation that defines and restricts the thing, thereby making it what it is and distinguishing it from all other things. In contrast, in respect to the second perfection mentioned earlier, human beings have an original disposition that makes it possible for them to pass beyond all stations and enter into what is sometimes called "the station of no station." In this situation, human beings do not identify themselves with anything in the universe. Rather, they see themselves as receptive to every self-disclosure of the Real, that is, every possibility of cosmic existence for all eternity. They exist, know, and act in full harmony with the Real. As a result, they manifest wisdom and compassion, since these are the fundamental attributes of the Real's self-disclosure.

Such people, known typically as "perfect human beings" (*al-insân al-kâmil*), identify with all things. They see each thing as manifesting its own specific perfection. They see all human beings as disclosing modalities of the Real and living in a mode of perfection



appropriate to their own limited circumstances. Hence they accept that things must be the way they are, because everything in heaven and earth manifests the Real and thus exhibits a certain limited form of perfection. At the same time, perfect human beings recognize that the wisdom of the Real demands compassion toward all things. Hence they act in keeping with this compassion, and the goal of compassion can only be to bring wisdom and bliss to all those who are receptive to it. In the case of human beings, wisdom and bliss can only be actualized through the second form of perfection, which is the achievement of the station of no station. Thus, although perfect human beings recognize the necessity of the first form of perfection, which is for each thing to exist within its own limitations, they also strive to guide people to the second form of perfection, which demands the elimination of ignorance and suffering.

In sum, God created human beings with his own two hands, which is to say that they embrace, in their original disposition, all the qualities and characteristics of the Real and the universe, whether these qualities be majestic or beautiful, whether they demand difference from the Real or identity with it, whether they require incomparability or similarity. In the initial stages of existence, human beings are overcome by ignorance. Hence, the attributes that dominate in their makeup are those that demand incomparability with and distance from the Real, so they live in ignorance. However, compassion toward the things of the cosmos is the Real's most fundamental characteristic. As the Prophet put it, "God's mercy takes precedence over his wrath." Hence the Real shows itself to human beings as embodied wisdom, thus allowing them to reorient themselves in relation to the Real. Wisdom lets them understand that they are nothing and everything. In contrast to everything else in the universe, they have the potential of standing in the station of no station as well as in every delimited and defined station.

From the Sufi perspective, what is normally called "psychological health" in modern society is simply acquiescence to the limitations imposed upon us by ignorance. Hence it is, in certain respects, more dangerous than what is called "psychological illness." With illness, there is at least the possibility of recognizing that we are sick and need to be cured, but if we think that we are healthy, that means that the fundamental illness-ignorance is deeply rooted in our own makeup. It is incurable so long as it is not recognized for what it is. As long as people think that they are one thing and not something else, as long as they think that they have found their appropriate places in the scheme of things, as long as they believe that they belong to any specific station, then there is no possibility for them to achieve truly human perfection, health, and wholeness, which is to stand in the station of no station.

People cannot achieve wholeness until they recognize that they are nothing, no thing, and that they belong to no situation and no station. In order to know themselves and to achieve the perfection that is uniquely human, they must strive to eliminate every identification of self with anything in existence. In other words, the only hope for man is to recognize that he suffers in his every situation. He must recognize that to exist in any specific mode is to live in pain, and he must cultivate this pain in order to escape it. The worst of all possible fates is not to know that we are constantly suffering because

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we are separated from our own reality, which is nothing but the Real. Rumi, the greatest of Sufi poets, has many verses on this theme. Let me quote three lines in conclusion:

Pain renews old medicines and lops off  
every branch of indifference.  
Pain is an alchemy that makes everything new—  
where is indifference when pain intervenes?  
Beware, do not sigh coldly in your indifference—  
Seek pain! Seek pain, pain, pain!<sup>5)</sup>

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- 1) For an explanation of Sufism's role within the Islamic tradition, see W.C. Chittick, Faith and Practice of Islam: Three Thirteenth Century Sufi Texts (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1992).
  - 2) I will depend mainly upon the teachings of Ibn al-'Arabi(d. 1240), generally recognized as the greatest master of the theoretical formulation of Sufi teaching and practice. For an overview of his teachings that amplifies upon many of the ideas mentioned in this paper, see W.C. Chittick, Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); for a detailed study of his major teachings, see idem, The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination (Albany: SUNY Press, 1989).
  - 3) Sachiko Murata has provided a wide-ranging study of Islamic yin-yang complementarity as it relates to metaphysics, cosmology, and psychology in The Tao of Islam: A Sourcebook on Gender Relationships in Islamic Thought (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).
  - 4) I do not mean to imply that Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are, in themselves, merely human attempts to establish harmony with the Real. Rather, in the context of early Islam, they were understood—and necessarily so for the establishment of Islamic self-identity—as humanly distorted paths to the Real. The role of Islam was then to rectify the distortions and put people back on the straight path of their own original disposition. Muhammad never claimed that his message was new. Like Confucius, he was re-establishing the way of the ancients, Abraham in particular.
  - 5) Mathnawâ VI 4302-4; adapted from Chittick, The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), p. 208.



# PSYCHOTHERAPY EAST AND WEST

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## INTEGRATION OF PSYCHOTHERAPIES

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