

CHAPTER 17

The Spirituality of the Sufi Path

William C. Chittick

Introduction

I understand Sufism as a dimension of the Islamic tradition that stresses the need to undergo spiritual transformation. Those who wanted to achieve transformation typically undertook specific practices and disciplines known as the Ṭarīqa (*al-tarīqa*), “the Path,” one of the words by which Sufism was commonly designated. Many guides on the Ṭarīqa never put pen to paper and were remembered only because of their influence on contemporaries or later generations. Others entered into the ranks of the most prolific authors of Islamic history. The primary literature is vast and extends into the modern period, with many Sufi teachers active today (Chittick 2000). Any attempt to survey the major branches of the Ṭarīqa, not to speak of the famous authors, would go far beyond the bounds allotted to this chapter. I can only hope to describe in barest terms the theory and practice of the Sufi path as explained in classical texts.

The Qur’ān and Hadith frequently refer to human life as a journey. The opening chapter of the Qur’ān, recited in every daily prayer, sums up the goal of Islamic practice with another word for path, *ṣirāṭ*: “Guide us on the Straight Path!” (Q 1: 6). By living in the world, people necessarily follow a path back to their Creator. Not every path, however, leads back to God’s mercy and forgiveness, since people may also encounter Him as wrathful and vengeful. They will be held responsible for the path they chose to follow in this world. A straight path will be rooted in the divine guidance that comes by way of the prophets generally and Muḥammad specifically, and crooked paths will be based on the illusions of the ego, or, in Qur’ānic terms, the constantly shifting wind of caprice (*hawā*): “Who is more misguided than he who follows his own caprice without guidance from God?” (Q 28: 50).

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Everyone necessarily follows a path back to God. This necessity arises from reality's very nature as expressed in the first principle of the Islamic religion, *tawḥīd*, the assertion of divine unity. Most succinctly *tawḥīd* means, in the words of the *Shahāda*, "There is no god but God." God is understood in terms of the Most Beautiful Names (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*), such as One, Alive, Knowing, Desiring, Powerful, Merciful, Just, Loving, and Forgiving. "No god but God" means that there is nothing truly one but God, nothing truly alive but God, nothing truly aware, powerful, merciful, just, loving, and forgiving but God. In short, nothing is truly real but the Real (*al-Ḥaqq*). The unreal life of the world leads inexorably to death, which will then be followed by resurrection in the Divine Presence. The inevitability of the outcome leads to a stress on the notion of "return" (*ma'ād*), which is generally understood as religion's third principle.

As for the second principle, prophecy (*nubuwwa*), it stems from God's mercy and compassion. In order to deliver people from the crooked paths to which they incline because of their innate tendency to forget, God sent a continuous line of prophets, 124,000 in number, from Adam down to Muḥammad. All came as guides to *tawḥīd* and salvation. With one voice they announced that human beings are contingent on the Real and should live up to His compassionate and loving nature. The Qur'ān makes the point succinctly in the verse, "And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, 'There is no god but I, so serve Me'" (Q 21: 25).

The Prophetic Model

All branches of Islamic learning recognize that people need guidance if they are to conform with what God wants from them. The primary guide on the path can only be the Prophet Muḥammad, the recipient of the Qur'ān and the founder of the community, even if *tawḥīd* demands that in the last analysis there is no guide but God: "Surely thou [O Muḥammad!] guidest not whom thou lovest, but God guides whomsoever He will" (28: 56). Sufism has placed greater stress on following Muḥammad than any other branch of Islamic learning. Its teachers have insisted that the Prophet's Sunna—the exemplary model that he established—must be imitated in order to actualize the truth of *tawḥīd* and to serve the Real in an appropriate manner. They have also insisted that his Sunna includes not only proper activity and correct morality but also internal transformation, and that this transformation is the *raison d'être* of both activity and morality.

Sufi teachers explained the need to traverse the Straight Path in countless ways. For example, they understood the soul or self (*nafs*) as an invisible force created by God with the role of governing the body. Since human beings function simultaneously on two different levels, soul and body, or awareness and activity, the path has two corresponding levels. One is the outward path of proper activity called the Sharī'a, which was codified by the jurists and is considered mandatory for all Muslims. The other is the inner path of the transformation of the soul, the Ṭarīqa, which in theory should be followed by everyone, but in practice is consciously and actively undertaken by a small minority. Literally, Sharī'a designates a broad path and Ṭarīqa a narrow path.

The mythic model for the narrow path is provided by the Prophet's ascent to God, which is recounted in the famous story of the Night Journey (*al-Isrāʿ*), also called the *Miʿrāj*, "ladder" or "ascent." The Angel Gabriel came to Muḥammad one night while he was asleep, woke him, and took him to Jerusalem, where he led all 124,000 prophets in prayer. Then Gabriel carried him up through the seven spheres of the heavens, in each of which he conversed with the prophet in charge (Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and so on). Next, he was given a tour of Hell and Paradise and, at the culmination of the journey, he went on to meet God alone. When he returned to the furthest boundary of Paradise where Gabriel was waiting for him, he was taken back down through the seven spheres to Jerusalem and then to Mecca, where his bed was still warm.

Muḥammad's ascent to God has typically been understood as the complement of the Qur'ān's descent into his soul, not least because the Angel Gabriel was in charge of both the book's revelation and the Prophet's climb. In other words, the Qur'ān was sent down so that people could come up. Those who want to follow the Prophet should strive to embody the Qur'ān as he embodied it and rise up as he rose up. Those who reach the Divine Presence by following in his footsteps may then be given the task of guiding others. This is how the Sufi tradition understands the function of the *shaykh*, the "elder," who guides aspirants in the observance of the Sunna. It also helps explain why Sufism stresses the importance of the *silsila*, the chain of transmitted guidance that connects the shaykh by a series of intermediaries back to the Prophet himself.

Soul and Spirit

When the human soul is understood as something in need of transformation, it is often contrasted with the Spirit (*rūḥ*) mentioned in Qur'ānic verses about God's creation of Adam, who began as clay molded by God. When God blew the Spirit into Adam, he came to life and awareness. This specific spirit, which God ascribes to Himself by calling it "My Spirit" (Q 15: 29, Q 38: 72), was given many names, such as the Ascribed Spirit, the Muḥammadan Spirit, and the First Intellect. The Prophet Muḥammad is said to have alluded to it with his words, "I was a prophet when Adam was between water and clay." Much like the Logos in Christian theology, it was understood as the prototype for all of creation, not least the moral and spiritual perfections that came to be embodied in the 124,000 prophets. It was considered the first step in the creative process and the penultimate step in the return to God. Among its sobriquets is the Supreme Pen, in keeping with a hadith which says that the first thing God created was the Pen, which He then instructed to write out His knowledge of creation until the Day of Resurrection.

Sufi teachers, basing themselves on the Qur'ān's frequent mentions of God's act of originating the world and taking it back to Himself, often spoke of the created realm in terms of two arcs, descending and ascending, also called the Origin (*al-mabdaʿ*) and the Return (*al-maʿād*). They drew the expression "two arcs" from a Qur'ānic verse typically understood as a reference to the Prophet's proximity to God during the *Miʿrāj*: "He was two bows' [i.e., arcs'] length away, or closer" (Q 53: 9). Like *arcus* in Latin, the Arabic term *qaws* that is used in this verse means both bow and arc. In metaphorical terms,

human beings first become aware of themselves somewhere past the beginning of the ascending arc, the bottom of which marks the furthest point of separation from the Origin. People are then faced with the fact that they must go back to where they came from. There is nothing exceptional about going back, since everything returns to the Creator, but the human case is complicated by the presence of self-awareness and free will. Having created humans in His own image, God gives them a measure of freedom and calls upon them to put their freedom into practice by returning voluntarily to Him, rather than waiting for the inevitable.

In short, the Muḥammadan Spirit or Ascribed Spirit is the intermediary through which human beings gradually descend from God's presence until they reach self-awareness and find themselves heading back toward the same Spirit, the penultimate step before reaching God Himself.¹ As embodied in the Prophet Muḥammad the Spirit provided the guidance that came to be known as the Sunna, with its twin components of *Shari'a* and *Ṭariqa*. Together these two components make up the Straight Path, the aim of which is to re-awaken the Spirit in each and every human individual. The final goal of both *Shari'a* and *Ṭariqa* was often called the *Ḥaqīqa*, the Reality, that is, the Supreme Reality that blew the Spirit into man in the first place. In some later texts, one meets the purported hadith of the Prophet, "The *Shari'a* is my words, the *Ṭariqa* my acts, and the *Ḥaqīqa* my states." In any case the three terms are commonly discussed together from relatively early times.

Stages of the Path

Sufi teachers wrote numerous books describing the *Ṭariqa* as a series of ever more subtle levels extending deep into the self, all the way back to the Ascribed Spirit and the *Ḥaqīqa*. Just as God, in Qur'ānic terms, "sits on the Throne," which encompasses both Heaven and Earth, so also, according to a saying often ascribed to the Prophet Muḥammad, God sits within the heart, the Throne of the human soul. Hence, He encompasses human reality from within just as He encompasses it from without. The levels of the Path descending to the inner Throne parallel the stages of the Prophet's *Mi'rāj* ascending to the outer Throne.

Each stage of the journey was typically called a station (*maqām*), a word used for the resting places of caravans. Authors agreed that there are many stations, often enumerating them in terms of archetypal numbers. The Persian poet Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (d. 1221 CE) provides a well-known example in *The Speech of the Birds* (*Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, 'Aṭṭār 1998). He describes a meeting of many species of birds to discuss whether or not they have a king called the *Sīmurgh* or Phoenix. A large flock sets off on a quest to find this supposed king, and their flight takes them over seven mountains corresponding to the seven spheres that the Prophet traversed during the *Mi'rāj*. The mountains are

¹The two arcs of the Islamic cosmos are extensively described and diagrammed by the early eighteenth-century Chinese Muslim author Liu Zhi in the book *Nature and Principle in Islam* (*Tianfang xingli*; Murata et al. 2009).

called “Seeking,” “Love,” “Recognition,” “Un-neediness,” “*Tawhīd*,” “Bewilderment,” and “Poverty,” all of which are standard designations for stations on the Sufi Path. Many of the birds are not able to put up with the hardships of the journey and fall by the wayside. In the end only “thirty birds”—the meaning of the Persian term *sī murgh*—reach the goal, which entails a vision of themselves as nothing but the self-disclosure of the *Simurgh* itself.

The classic depiction of the Ṭarīqa or Sufi Way in Arabic was written by ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī (d. 1088 CE), a theologian and jurist from Herat in what is now Afghanistan. His short book, *Manāzil al-sā’irīn*, “The Way Stations of the Travelers,” describes one hundred stations, each of which is subdivided into three levels. The names of the stations are drawn mainly from the Qur’ān and the Hadith. In each case, Anṣārī provides a dense description of virtues, character traits, and perceptions that must be achieved if one is to reach the Ḥaqīqa. He drew from many earlier teachers and provided inspiration for numerous later teachers. The book’s originality lies in its concise and systematic description of the ascending steps on the Path and the beauty of its prose.

The Power of Love

If we look for a single word that sums up the ethos of the Sufi path, we can hardly do better than Love (*maḥabba*, *‘ishq*, Chittick 2013, xxiv–xxvi). The importance of this concept is familiar to anyone who has read Sufi poetry, such as that of Ibn al-Fāriḍ (d. 1234 CE), Rūmī (d. 1273 CE), ‘Aṭṭār, Ḥāfiẓ (d. 1390 CE), and Yunus Emre (d. 1328 CE). Sufis emphasized Love for many reasons, not least because the general run of preachers insisted that the only way to deal with the yawning gap between the divine and the human was meticulous observance of the Sharī’a. These sermonizers warned of the fire of hell and promised paradise for good deeds, trying to stir up fear of God’s wrath and hope for His forgiveness. Sufi teachers did not neglect fear and hope, but they considered them doorways to Love, the divine power that works the actual transformation of the soul. Moreover, the trend in Islamic scholarship has always been to stress the importance of knowledge and formal learning (*‘ilm*) and then to call people to follow the religious scholars (*‘ulamā’*), that is, “those who have knowledge.” It is easy to forget that real knowledge is what you learn for yourself, not what you are told to believe. It is not so easy to forget, however, that no one can love for you.

In explaining Love as the key to self-transformation, Sufis situated this concept within the context of *tawhīd*. Several Qur’ānic verses make God either the subject or the object of love. In other words, the Qur’ān declares that God is both lover and beloved. The Qur’ānic divine name *al-wadūd*, usually translated as “The Loving,” also has the grammatical sense of “Beloved.” If God is *al-wadūd*, then there is no true lover and no true beloved but God. This is why the great Sufi and Sunni theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111 CE) pointed out that in the final analysis, God loves only Himself and that His love for others is a function of His self-love (al-Ghazālī 2011, 101–102). His reasoning can be supported by typical interpretations of the Prophet Muḥammad’s well-known saying, “God is beautiful and He loves beauty.” *Tawhīd* means that God

alone is truly beautiful and that He loves His own beauty before all else. He loves others only insofar as they display His beauty.

In Qur'ānic terms, God's beauty is designated by the Most Beautiful Names. Created things are beautiful because "[God] made beautiful all that He created" (Q 32: 7). Addressing human beings, God says, "He formed you, so He made your forms beautiful" (Q 40: 64). Human beauty exceeds that of all other creatures: "We created the human being in the most beautiful stature" (Q 95: 4). This is because, as the Prophet said, "[God] created Adam on the basis of His form," that is, the form of the Most Beautiful Names, a point that is sometimes brought out in interpretations of the Qur'ānic verse, "He taught [Adam] all of the names" (Q 2: 31). Sufi teachers commonly marshal these and other scriptural passages to support a variety of metaphysical, theological, and cosmological arguments demonstrating that God's love for human beings is the final cause of creation—a conclusion that was also drawn by philosophers like the great Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d. 1037 CE; Chittick 2013, 279–287).

Given that True Reality and Absolute Beauty are the exclusive possessions of God, God clearly had no need for human beings or for anything else. Why then did He create the universe? Islamic theology in its various forms has provided many answers to this question, but they boil down to the ontological necessity of the Real. The Real Being (*al-Ḥaqq*) acts in keeping with what It is. In scripture this Being alerts us to what Its necessity demands by calling Itself by the Most Beautiful Names. In other words, by necessity God is merciful, compassionate, knowing, desiring, speaking, and so on. Once this is acknowledged, it becomes clear that these real and necessary attributes of the Ultimate Reality must also have repercussions in everything other than God. Aḥmad Sam'ānī (d. 1140 CE), one of the greatest masters of the theology of Love, explains in his Persian commentary on the divine names that by naming Himself, God is saying, "I had pure attributes—so there had to be a recognizer. I had unqualified beauty—so there had to be a lover. I had an Essence without how—so there had to be a seeker" (Sam'ānī 2019, 366).

From the thirteenth century CE onward, many if not most Sufi teachers explained God's motivation for creating the universe by citing a divine saying derived from accounts of the prophet David. When David asked God why He had created the universe, He replied, "I was a hidden treasure and I loved to be recognized, so I created the creatures that they might recognize Me." The word "recognition" (*ma'rifa*, also a form of "knowing") points to the special role of human beings; since the human being alone was created in the form of God's Most Beautiful Names, he alone has the capacity to recognize God as the source of all beauty and good. In the later tradition, the word *'irfān*, a semantic cognate of *ma'rifa*, was commonly used to designate Sufism in its more theoretical aspects.

From early times, those who differentiated between recognition and knowledge maintained that knowledge is acquired from others, but recognition comes from immediate perception. The aim of Sufi teachers was to guide students beyond hearsay to self-recognition, which is to perceive the presence of God at the very root of the soul. This goal is epitomized by a famous saying of Imam 'Alī: "He who recognizes his own self will recognize his Lord." The difference between the two sorts of knowing is caught

nicely by a saying of the famous Sufi Abū Yazīd al-Baṣṭāmī (d. 874 CE): “You take your knowledge dead from the dead; I take my knowledge from the Living who does not die.”

The metaphor of the Hidden Treasure is often mentioned in connection with the most frequently cited Qur’ānic verse on Love, “[God] loves them, and they love Him” (Q5 : 54). Sufi teachers understood this verse as a statement of fact. God loves man and cannot *not* love him, for He created man in the most beautiful stature and He loves beauty by definition. In a similar way, the human being loves God and cannot *not* love Him, for God created the human being in His own form. Hence man, like God, loves beauty, for all beauty is a trace of God’s Beauty. If we think that some people do not love God, this is our mistake. It is impossible not to love God, because love is directed at the beautiful and the good, and all beauty and good belong to Him. Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī frequently counsels his readers to wake up to their own true beloved. From now on, he says, stop being deceived by gold-plating— take the real gold from the mine of gold (Chittick 1983, 202).

To come back to the question of the purpose of creation, the simplest answer is that God created the world because “He loves Adam and his children.” The Qur’ān often speaks of God’s love, and the object of His Love is never anything other than human beings. The universe is the fruit of this love, for all of its components are needed to bring human beings into existence.

The verse of mutual love—“He loves them, and they love Him” (Q 5: 54)—highlights the fact that to speak of Love is to speak of two. Only in the Divine Essence are the Lover and Beloved the same. The moment we talk of God’s love for the human being or the human being’s love for God, we are talking about duality, yet the goal of the Islamic tradition is to establish unity, *tawḥīd*. Hence the concept of Love indicates the problem, which is the separation (*firāq*) of lover and beloved; however, it simultaneously also suggests the solution to the problem, which is to overcome separation and achieve union (*wiṣāl*). Rūmī’s famous *Mathnawī* (Rūmī 1925–1940), a 25,000-verse epic of Love, states this problem in the first line: “Listen to the reed as it complains, /telling the tales of separation.” In brief, Love is a transformative force that can bring human beings into total conformity with their True Beloved.

Becoming a Lover

The Persian Sufi ‘Alī ibn ‘Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (d. ca. 1072 CE), whose tomb is still venerated today in Lahore, Pakistan, wrote one of the earliest compendiums of Sufi teachings in the Persian language, *Unveiling the Veiled (Kashf al-maḥjūb)*. In the chapter on the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), he makes a point that is historically and linguistically suspect but nonetheless instructive in any discussion of Love’s role in the Ṭarīqa. The great teachers have agreed, he says, that Love (*maḥabba*) is the foundation of the Path to God. The various stations of the Path display the diverse relationships established between the two lovers during the stages of their love affair. But the word “love” is just too commonplace. Everyone uses it and understands it within the context of his or her own limitations. Hence Sufi teachers sometimes replace it with the word *ṣafīwa*, “limpidness,” referring to

the purity and luminosity of the proximity to the Divine that is the travelers' goal. This is why a true lover of God is called a *ṣūfī*, that is, a "limpid one," for he has been transformed and transmuted by the Divine Light (al-Hujwīrī 1970, 309).

Hujwīrī's contemporary Anṣārī did not give Love an especially prominent place in his *Way Stations of the Travelers*, but he certainly understood it as foundational, a fact that comes out clearly in his Persian work, *One Hundred Fields* (*Ṣad maydān*). The word "field" alludes to a field of battle, in this case the battle that is commonly called "the greater *jihād*" (*al-jihād al-akbar*) that is, the struggle against the soul's self-centered nature. Written some thirty years before *Way Stations*, Anṣārī's *One Hundred Fields* describes the Path to God in similar but not identical terms. In a prefatory note Anṣārī states that the book records the gist of what he said in a series of sermons delivered in the year 1056 CE. The topic was a specific Qur'ānic verse, one that is quoted in discussions of love only slightly less often than the verse of mutual love: "Say: 'If you love God, follow me; God will love you'" (Q 3: 31).

This verse is addressed to the Prophet Muḥammad, telling him to convey to his community that if they follow the prophetic model designated for them by God, they will be the objects of God's Love. Notice that this is another sort of love, different from that which creates and sustains the universe. Creative love is universal and unconditional, but this love is particular and conditional, for it is God's response to following the Messenger. If someone fulfills this condition, God will love him and bring about his soul's transformation. This is confirmed by a divine saying found in standard collections of Hadith: "When My servant approaches Me through good works, I love him, and, when I love him, I am the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees, the hand with which he holds, and the foot with which he walks." When God's Love turns toward the human lover, it overcomes separation and brings about union.

In short, Anṣārī's description of the one hundred fields begins by telling the reader that each of the mentioned virtues and character traits—each of the stations of Sufi spirituality—is achieved by following the Prophet Muḥammad in the Path of Love for God. That this indeed is the theme of the book is confirmed by the very last paragraph, which states, "These one hundred fields are all drowned in the Field of Love." Anṣārī adds that love, like the other mentioned stations, can be subdivided into three ascending levels, in this case Truthfulness, Drunkenness, and Nonbeing (Anṣārī 1998, 333).

Truthfulness is a virtue mentioned frequently in the Qur'ān, as in the verse, "Men truthful in the covenant they made with God" (Q 33: 23). This is the Covenant of Love and Service, made on the pre-creational Day of *Alast*. At that time God said to the children of Adam, "Am I not your Lord (*alastu bi-rabbikum*)?" With one voice they responded, "Yes indeed, we bear witness" (Q 7: 172). Outwardly, the Covenant demands the worshipful service of obeying the Sharī'a; inwardly, it demands love and following the Ṭarīqa. Aḥmad Sam'ānī explains that God has addressed people on two levels, soul and spirit, or body and heart:

To the bodies He spoke of Lordhood, to the spirits He spoke of love.
 "O bodies, I am God! O hearts, I am the Friend!
 "O bodies, you belong to Me! O hearts, I belong to you!

“O bodies, toil, for that is what Lordhood requires from servanthood. O hearts, be joyful—*Rejoice in Me and take pleasure in remembering Me*—for that is what unqualified love demands.
 “O bodies, yours are the realities of struggle! O hearts, yours are the gardens of contemplation!
 “O bodies, yours is the discipline of practice! O hearts, yours is the rose garden of beginningless gentleness!”

(Sam‘ānī 2019, 116)

Truthfulness, then, consists of sincerity in fulfilling God’s Covenant and following the Straight Path, the two sides of which are called Shari‘a and Ṭarīqa. The Straight Path leads to the presence of the Beloved, yielding the second stage of Love, which is intoxication and joy. Nevertheless, the differing qualities that pertain to Lover and Beloved give news of a lingering duality. This is why Anṣārī says that the final stage of the Path of Love is the lover’s nonbeing, for only the Divine Beloved is truly real. A few years later, Aḥmad al-Ghazālī (d. 1126 CE), the brother of the more famous Muḥammad, was to explain the lover’s nonbeing with exquisitely elusive prose in a short treatise called *Apparitions (Sawānīh)*, the most famous book on Love in the Persian language (Ghazālī 1986).

Transformation of Character

The lover’s goal is to reach the station where God is “the hearing with which he hears, the eyesight with which he sees,” and so on. This hadith, constantly quoted in discussions of love, points to union, though many other terms are also used. The coming together of the two lovers raises touchy theological issues, not least because the Islamic tradition is generally careful to maintain an absolute distinction between Creator and created. Some of the richest and most sophisticated works in Islamic literature are in fact dedicated to explaining the exact nature of the union that comes about between God and the human being, and the least one can say is that there is no simple, straightforward explanation. One such book, perhaps the most sophisticated of all, is *The Meccan Openings (al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya)* by Muḥyiddīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 1240 CE), who is commonly called “the Greatest Shaykh” because of his uniquely detailed and profound explications of Islamic metaphysics, theology, cosmology, spiritual psychology, and jurisprudence.

One of many approaches used by Ibn al-‘Arabī and others to explain the nature of the soul’s transformation is to speak in terms of *‘ilm al-akhlāq*, “the science of ethics.” As developed by teachers such as Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, the subject of ethics synthesizes Islamic and Greek learning and analyzes the soul in terms of “character traits,” a more literal translation of the word *akhlāq*. This word is the plural of *khuluq*, which comes from the same Arabic root and, in the normal, un-voweled script, is written the same as *khalq*, “creation.” When the two words are contrasted, *khalq* can refer to a person’s physical characteristics and *khuluq* to the qualities that make up his character,

whether for good or for ill. In a short prayer, the Prophet Muḥammad uses the two words while alluding to the Qur'ānic notion that God created human beings beautiful: "O God, Thou hast made my creation beautiful, so make my character beautiful too!"

Islamic texts take it for granted that God answered the Prophet's prayer and made his character beautiful. Hence, he is the model to be followed in Love for God. The Qur'ān affirms the beauty of his character in a number of verses, such as "You have a beautiful example in God's Messenger" (Q 33: 21) and "Surely [O, Muḥammad!] thou hast a magnificent character" (Q 68: 4). Muḥammad's wife 'Ā'isha explained succinctly why his character was magnificent: "His character was the Qur'ān." This is to say that his soul was the very embodiment of the Divine Word, for he had fully actualized the divine form in which Adam was created, a form designated by the Most Beautiful Names.

In discussions of ethics, the divine names are sometimes called "God's character traits." Hence Ghazālī and others refer to the actualization of the Divine Spirit blown into the human substance as "becoming characterized by the character traits of God" (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh*). Authors of books on the Divine Names, a common genre in both theology and Sufism, often devoted part of each name's explanation to the manner in which human beings should participate in it. Ibn al-'Arabī does so in his book-length chapter on the Divine Names in the *Meccan Openings*, but he also devotes a great deal of space to the same issue in the other 539 chapters of this book. In fact, it can justly be claimed that the whole of this enormous tome, along with many of his other writings, discusses the nature of human perfection and the manner in which the human soul can realize the divine form in which it was created.

Most commonly, Ibn al-'Arabī talks about human perfection in terms of the divine qualities and character traits that became manifest in the prophets. His most famous book, *The Ringstones of Wisdom* (*Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*; Ibn al-'Arabī 2004), is organized around the notion that the moral and spiritual character of each of the twenty-seven prophets mentioned in the book was delineated by one specific divine attribute. In reading such accounts, it is easy to forget that Ibn al-'Arabī's complex metaphysical, cosmological, and spiritual vision was meant to be a plan of action, not simply a theoretical explanation of the way things are. He was filling in the details of "the beautiful example" established by the Prophet Muḥammad, and this explains why he emphasized that the highest station on the Path, when union has been achieved and the lover has become one with the Divine Beloved, is nothing other than the "Muḥammadan Station" (Chittick 1989, 375–381).

Using all the tools of sophisticated scholarship, Ibn al-'Arabī spoke endlessly about the various dimensions of human perfection, the nature of the final union to be achieved, and the path that needs to be followed in order to reach the goal. His younger contemporary Rūmī preferred anecdotes and analogies to help seekers understand what is at issue. For example, Rūmī bypassed the theological hair-splitting that goes on in talk of union by telling a story about fish: In the beginning, we were all fish, swimming in the infinite ocean, with no awareness of the ocean and ourselves. In its mercy and compassion, the ocean threw us up on dry land, and now we find ourselves flipping and flopping, not knowing that we are fish and yearning for a water of which we have no real awareness. In the end, the ocean will pull us back, and we will once again be fish,

swimming in the infinite ocean; but now, however, we are aware of both the ocean and ourselves (Rūmī 2000, 121–122; Chittick 1983, 70–71). In other words, the difference between the beginning and end of our journey in life lies in the mutual recognition of self and God: “He who recognizes his own self will recognize his Lord.”

Human Perfection

Discussions of the Sufi Path focus on the ascending stages of the *Miʿrāj*, as detailed by authors like Anṣārī. The task of the Sufi shaykh is to guide seekers stage by stage and station by station until they achieve perfection in the measure of their own capacities. Many teachers pointed out that human capacity differs from individual to individual. All human souls are created in the form of God (*Allāh*), which is the divine name to which all other divine names refer, but each human soul also has its own unique identity and destiny. From a certain standpoint, everything in existence names God insofar as it gains its reality from Him and points back to Him, thus acting as a “sign” (*āya*) of God. In the human case, every individual was created in the form of God Himself, so each human being is a sign of God per se. Ibn al-ʿArabī and his followers commonly discussed three divine books written out with “signs” (also the Qurʾānic word for verses): the Qurʾān, the universe, and the human self. Each “book” makes manifest the totality of the Divine Names in the appropriate manner.

Ibn al-ʿArabī developed the notion of human deformity in voluminous detail. He maintained that despite the fact that every human being is patterned after the form of God, each person is also uniquely himself and hence, in addition to being a sign of the name *Allāh*, is also a sign of one or more other Divine Names, and it is these other names that determine the person’s specific characteristics in this world and his final destiny in the next. In the case of most people, the Divine Names that determine their nature are what later scholars called “particular” (*juzʿī*) or individual names. These are contrasted with the “universal” (*kullī*) names, that is, those mentioned explicitly by the Qurʾān or the Prophet Muḥammad. It is the latter rather than the former that determine the spiritual qualities and character traits of the prophets and the greatest of their followers.

Ibn al-ʿArabī often explains that every prophet is the archetype of spiritual perfection for his community, embracing all the perfections of his followers. In effect, when someone follows a specific prophet, he is aiming to become characterized by the divine character traits found in that prophet. Each prophet reaches a station of perfection that manifests the name *Allāh* itself, but each is also colored by a different universal name. Hence the “spirituality” of Jesus is markedly different from that of Moses, Abraham, Noah, or Job. As for the last of the prophets, he is the most perfect of all, for the Muḥammadan Station—that is, his station of spirituality—embraces all of the perfections of the 124,000 prophets sent by God. Each prophet made manifest a particular, though universal, image of the divine perfection, whereas the Prophet Muḥammad’s station embraced and fully actualized all of the universal divine attributes.

In this way of looking at things, those who engage in the quest for God and reach advanced stages of the Ṭarīqa will reach the perfection to which God has been calling

them, but this perfection can never be the plenary perfection that was accorded to the Prophet Muḥammad and a handful of his followers. Thus, Ibn al-ʿArabī wrote that God has placed on earth a friend of God (*walī Allāh*, a “saint”) who follows in the footsteps of each of the 124,000 prophets (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911, 3: 208). This is not to say that each will consciously follow the specific prophet in whose footsteps he walks, but rather that his or her capacity in following Muḥammad or one of the other great prophets (Jesus, according to Ibn al-ʿArabī, also stood in the Muḥammadan Station) will conform to the perfection originally embodied in one of the 124,000 prophetic archetypes of humanity.

The Muḥammadan Station, then, is the highest form of human perfection. Those who achieve it are characterized by God’s character traits. Ibn al-ʿArabī also calls this station by a number of other names, such as “the Station of No Station” (*maqām lā maqām*). He writes, for example,

The most all-inclusive specification is that a person not be delimited by a station whereby he is distinguished. So, the Muhammadan is only distinguished by the fact that he has no station specifically. His station is that of no station... The relationship of the stations to the Muhammadan is the same as the relationship of the names to God. (Ibn al-ʿArabī 1911; Chittick 1989, 376)

Although his language is often convoluted, Ibn al-ʿArabī typically reiterates teachings that were voiced by great Muslims before him in less technical language. By speaking of the Muḥammadan station in the above terms, he voices the common understanding that Muḥammad was the greatest of the prophets because he was given the Qur’ān, the comprehensive scripture that embraces all previous scriptures. Moreover, his “magnificent character” was precisely “the Qur’ān,” which is to say that internally he realized the Divine Word to the fullest possible measure. By calling Muḥammad’s perfection a “station,” however, Ibn al-ʿArabī brings a relatively static picture of the Prophet into the context of the Path to God. In following Muḥammad, people strive to reach his station, although there is a vast range of perfect human types. If Muḥammad had stood in one specific station, as did the other prophets, those who followed him could reach only that station. Since he stands in no specific station, his station embraces all stations. When Anṣārī writes at the end of *One Hundred Fields*, “These one hundred fields are all drowned in the field of Love,” he is making the same point. If you love God, you should follow the Prophet Muḥammad, whoever you are and wherever you stand, for he is the model in which all prophetic perfections are synthesized, so the one hundred stations are dimensions of his magnificent character. He himself, however, stands in none of the stations, for he actualized all of them and went beyond them.

Aḥmad Samʿānī, who died sixteen years before Ibn al-ʿArabī’s birth, talks about the Prophet Muḥammad in similar terms, using the Persian-Arabic compound word “stationlessness” (*bī-maqāmī*): “On the night of the *Miʿrāj* Muḥammad was made to pass over all the stations so that he would be higher than everyone else. Thus, they would all be seeking his station, and he would be fleeing from their stations. When he was taken through all the stations, nothing was left but stationlessness, and that is the attribute of the Real” (Samʿānī 2019, 273).

The Transformative Fire

The ultimate goal of the spiritual quest in Sufism is God. The Sharī'a and Ṭarīqa are complementary paths that together lead to the Ḥaqīqa, the Divine Reality. The actual human situation is that no one has what he or she wants, despite what some people imagine. Everyone remains separate from the true goal, which is also the Origin. The power that can eliminate separation and bring about union can only be the power that brought about the separation in the first place, that is, God's love to be recognized. God's Love—"He loves them"—brought the universe into existence; thus, the human being's Love—"they love Him"—can open up the path to final consummation.

What then is Love? "Don't ask about Love," says Rūmī. "When you become like me, you'll know" (Rūmī 1967, lines 29050–1). His point is a matter of common perception; Love is inexplicable, but you will know it when you have found it. Muslim authors who wrote about Love never tried to define it exactly, but they did enjoy describing its symptoms. One of the most often discussed is the sense of being consumed by fire. Thus, Sam'ānī writes, "Love in its essence is fire, and every fire has a flame. The flame of love's fire is yearning. And what is yearning? *The thirst of hearts to encounter the beloved*" (Sam'ānī 2019, 288). The early twelfth-century Qur'ān commentator Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī (d. 1126 CE) quotes 'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī as saying that God's words, "the lit-up fire of God" (Q 104: 6), which ostensibly refer to Hell, also allude to "a fire set by the limpidness of love that spoils the delights of life and strips away solace. Nothing can hold it back short of the encounter" (Maybudī 2015, 555). According to Hujwīrī, the Sufi is the limpid one because the fire of Love has burned away the darkness and impurity of his own self, leaving nothing but pure gold.

The spirituality of the Sufi path can perhaps best be summed up by recalling that God created Adam when He blew His own Spirit into the molded clay of Adam's body. Having forgotten their true root, Adam's children must recover the Spirit embedded deeply within them. To do so they need to conform to the model established by the one whose soul received the perfect manifestation of the Divine Word. This is the Prophet Muḥammad. Such conformity involves a transformative process, often described as having three basic stages: purifying the soul of forgetfulness; becoming characterized by the divine character traits; and union with the Beloved. At the final stage, the soul's sense of separation disappears. This is what Sufi texts sometimes call the "annihilation" (*fanā*) of otherness and the "subsistence" (*baqā*) of the divine attributes in whose form the soul was created. Union is also called death to self, for the ego must die in order for the Spirit to shine forth. Moreover, the process of giving up the illusions of everyday life is painful, and once the soul perceives the true Object of its love, it suffers more intensely because of the fire of its yearning. As Anṣārī puts it, "When there is talk of friendship, life is the least of the least. Compared to one moment of separation's fire, hell is less than a lamp next to the seven depths of hell. How will our separation be, for separation gives off the scent of blood! O God, You have the fire of separation. Of what use is the fire of hell?" (Anṣārī 1998, 196; Chittick 2013, 406).

Despite the burning that Anṣārī refers to, the soul finds nothing quite as sweet as longing for the Beloved. Sufi texts insist that the pain suffered by the lovers is better than

any pleasure in the world, for they are constantly remembering their Beloved. Let me conclude with one of Aḥmad Ghazālī's comments on the suffering of love undergone by adepts on the Sufi path:

Love in reality is trial. In love intimacy and ease are alien and borrowed. The verified truth is that separation in love is duality, and the verified truth is that union is oneness. All the rest is the fantasy of union, not the reality of union. This is why someone said:

Love is trial—I'm the one who won't avoid trial.
 When love is asleep, I'm the one who stirs up misfortune.
 My friends say, "Avoid trial!"
 Trial is my heart. How can I avoid my heart?
 The tree of love is growing in my heart.
 When it needs water, I pour it from my eyes.
 Though love is sweet and sorrow not,
 how sweet it is to mix the two!

(Chittick 2013, 422)

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Biographical Notice

William C. Chittick is Distinguished Professor of Asian and Asian American Studies at Stony Brook University. A prolific translator and interpreter of classical Islamic philosophical and mystical texts, he is perhaps best known for his work on Rūmī and Ibn al-'Arabī. He has written extensively on the school of Ibn al-'Arabi, Islamic philosophy, and Islamic cosmology.