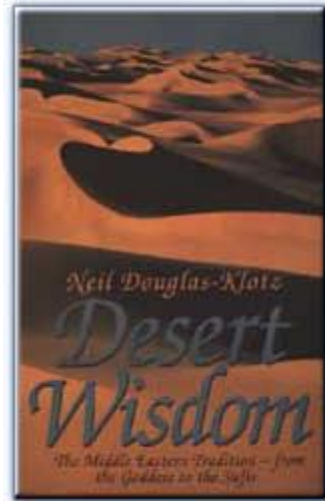


Desert Wisdom and the New Cosmology

An interview with Neil Douglas-Klotz (Sufi Saadi Shakur Chisti)



(Editor's note: Since 1987, Neil Douglas-Klotz has served on the core faculty of the Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality in Oakland, California. Neil is currently on leave and lives in Scotland, where he is based while doing further research as well as workshops in Europe. He is the author of the critically acclaimed book *Prayers of the Cosmos: Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus*. In his new book *Desert Wisdom*, he maps out the spiritual tradition of "native Middle Eastern spirituality" that stretches from the ancient Goddess cultures to Sufi mysticism. The collection of inspirational writings, including more translations from the Aramaic Jesus, invites readers to browse and dip into various threads of text and body prayer dealing with love, desire, diversity, relationship, purpose, and inner life, which are organized by overall themes relating to the New Cosmology. Neil (under his name Saadi Shakur Chishti) is recognized as a senior teacher in a branch of the Sufi path of mystical spirituality.)

Q: Why is *Desert Wisdom* different from other collections ?

NDK: *Desert Wisdom* challenges readers to look at the Middle East as one common ground of spirituality rather than as an isolated series of conflicting religions. It looks at the way that Europe and the West has, over the past 2000 years, extracted its own version of science and religion from the ground of Middle Eastern spirituality. In the same way, the West has returned in this century to extract oil from the Middle East to provide power for maintaining the culture it has created. We need to grapple with and understand this level of our own involvement in the Middle East. So far our diplomacy and attempted peace-making there has not done this.

Q: What does this have to do with people's relationship--or lack of relationship--with organized religion today ?

NDK: Whether we know it or not, we are all influenced by our culture's distorted version of Middle Eastern spirituality. From the very first verse of Genesis, we all subconsciously learn the division of "heaven" and "earth." Whether atheist or fundamentalist, we begin to act from this supposed gulf between an idealized utopia which is unreachable and the human predicament we are stuck with. This gulf further alienates us from each other, from nature and even from our own bodies, about which we are taught to feel ashamed.

Q: You say that this is a distorted version. What have you found that is different in these Middle Eastern writings ?

NDK: The main Middle Eastern languages spoken by the prophets of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are very poetic, multi-leveled and open-ended. One word can have many different meanings. The words of a prophet or mystic in this tradition-- stories, prayers and visionary statements-- were intended to challenge their listeners to understand them according to their own life experience. This is still a tradition of translation today in Judaism and Islam--that one statement can be heard or understood in several different ways. I have attempted to restore this oral, open-ended quality, which would have been heard by the original hearers of the Genesis story, the words of Jesus and the words of the Quran. It is bit like restoring the natural wildflowers, plants and trees to a particular area after it has been over-cultivated.

For instance, the Hebrew words that Genesis uses for "heaven" and "earth" can in context be understood as the two major ways our universe has developed. "Heaven" refers to the way in which everything is united as though by one sound, one ray of light or one vibrating wave. "Earth" refers to the individuality of every being--the way that the universe has mysteriously produced such abundant diversity that no two clouds, blades of grass or fingerprints are exactly the same. The Hebrew word for "heaven" refers to our sense of "we," the word for "earth" to our sense of "I." It is the same as the way physicists talk about seeing light as particle and wave simultaneously. How we deal with this seeming paradox on a personal level is one of the big mysteries and challenges of life.

Q: So how did we end up with the translations we have in the Bible ?

NDK: You have to understand that what we call organized religion is a relatively new innovation in human affairs, perhaps only two or three thousand years old. For at least ten or twenty times as long, humans participated in a more open-ended spirituality, one that used art, poetry, drama, dance and chant to make sense of their existence. Over the last two millennia, as humans moved increasingly into villages and cities, the way they organized themselves politically, socially and religiously also became more and more limited. Even separating life into the political, social and religious spheres involved defining, sorting and limiting. Organized religion does a wonderful job of defining who is in and who is out, what is a proper way of understanding the words of the prophet or teacher and what isn't. It does not, in general, have a large tolerance for ambiguity, mysticism or a spirituality defined by a

person's own life experience. Organized religion is the cultivated field; spirituality is the wild landscape. I'm not saying that organized religion is bad. Like our relationship with nature, however, many people want to re-evaluate what we've gained and lost, and what we can recover of the wildness that was there earlier. For many, this wildness represents possibility, creativity and enthusiasm for life--qualities that our modern culture doesn't particularly encourage.

Q: You mentioned our relationship with nature. What does your work have to say about that ?

NDK: In general, I would say that modern Western culture has focused more on the "I" than the "we," and has not included animals or plants in its sense of "we" at all. This is one of the reasons that people in many religious and spiritual traditions today are taking a closer look at the way that organized religion either supports or prevents a more healthy relationship with nature. As cosmologist Thomas Berry has pointed out, all sacred and religious revelations arose from humans trying to make sense of their place in nature--and the various seasons and cycles they observed around them. As I demonstrate in *Desert Wisdom*, this holds true for what I call the "native Middle Eastern tradition"--the ground of Western organized religion. As we damage nature, we damage the possibility for people to feel a sense of awe, gratitude and sacredness. Tarmac doesn't cultivate these feelings. It's no wonder we have the problems of violence, addiction and cynicism that we do.

Q: You mentioned the body...what did you find out about sexuality in these Middle Eastern writings ?

NDK: The sense of wildness in all the texts was limited, reduced and repressed during the development of Western culture. This was especially so for their expression of sexuality. As some psychologists have pointed out, it is easier to manage people and to control them when their sexuality is controlled or diverted into being a commodity that can be bought and sold. This begins as we learn in childhood to feel ashamed of our own bodies, which are in reality, as even the Christian scriptures say, temples of the sacred.

Put another way, the extent to which Western culture has been unwilling to look at its own religious roots in terms of an indigenous, earth-based spirituality reflects the extent of its denial of the body and the earth. This is why I emphasize the term "native Middle Eastern tradition"--to startle people into thinking that the ground of unity of these traditions is both beneath us, in the literal earth, as well as in the air we all breathe.

Q: Do you see any solution to these problems ? How can your book help ?

NDK: First it's important to ask the right questions. While the desire to secure sources of oil leads the West into increasingly dangerous conflicts in the Middle East, our culture also confronts the overall question of human survival into a "post-modern" age. How much oil is enough? How much of the earth's resources do we need to feed an addictive lifestyle which is maiming the earth for the next generation of human beings?

On the deepest level, what are we trying to get from the Middle East? What does this region mean for us in the West and for all of humanity at this time? What answers can it contribute to the overall

question of human survival on the earth?

To begin to answer these questions, I believe that Western culture needs to return to the Middle East as a student and partner, not as a teacher and dominator. But mere cross-cultural understanding, which seldom extends beyond mental concepts, is not enough. We must begin to experience a part of our collective psyche which was left behind when the mythic oil was extracted from the earth and used to fuel so-called Western religion. As we recover this psychic territory, we may be able to release the ways we seek, as a culture, to fill an inner void by taking more and more from the earth around us.

Q: *How do you propose that your readers do this sort of recovery ?*

NDK: In Desert Wisdom I have collected sayings, visions and stories, but I have also included a great many meditations, chants and "body prayers," which are based on traditional Middle Eastern spiritual practice. Through these, I've tried to offer readers a way to make this wisdom an embodied experience.

Ultimately, myth arises from a profound, direct experience of the natural world and intimations of its connection with the entire cosmos. Spiritual practice opens the door to such direct experience. Trying to take the myth without the embodied practice is at best a form of voyeurism. At worst it is a form of spiritual strip-mining: it raises the level of emotional and mental energy without really grounding it, that is, giving it back to the earth through our own bodies.

All original worship involves the whole self--mind, body, emotions, spirit. Let's face it: this is what people yearn for today. They are turning away from organized religion in droves because they don't find it. By the same token, fear of the unknown drives many to an even more restricted, fundamentalistic sort of religion, which doesn't require them to make any difficult decisions for themselves.

Q: *What is your background in the Middle East ?*

NDK: My family has Jewish blood, I was raised Christian and I have spent the past 20 years studying, among other things, Sufism, which is often considered the esoteric side of Islam. My own Sufi teachers tended to interpret the word islam very literally--as "surrender to the Source of all Being and nothing else." They traced the roots of Sufism much further back, before the three monotheistic religions. They looked at the heart of every religion and found truth and unity there. I am recognized as a senior teacher in several branches of the Chishti lineage of Sufism and am also part of a colloquium of teachers and scholars from diverse Sufi lineages called the International Association of Sufism. So my own personal history unites at least the three major religious traditions of the Middle East. In addition to Sufism, for the past 20 years, I have studied the spiritual practice of the Native Middle Eastern tradition with kabbalists, monks, nuns, mystics and shamans. I have researched their sacred writings in Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic, Persian and other languages. I am aware of the religious and theological differences that divide creed from creed and sect from sect. I leave these to those for whom there is interest. I am also aware of a greater

common ground of spirituality which unites not only the "great" religions but all religious experience in this area.

Q: *What is Sufism ?*

NDK: The word sufism can be variously translated, but simply means "wisdom." While Sufis themselves sometimes get into arguments about what it means and where it came from, the essential thing is what the medieval Egyptian Sufi Al-Ghazzali said: "Sufism is based on spiritual experiences, not on premises or concepts." I would add to this that, whatever its relationship to various forms of the organized religion of Islam, Sufism always includes the complete surrender to the Only Being that is the literal meaning of the word Islam. It is simply another face and development of the native Middle Eastern tradition. Most people know Sufism from its great classical love poets--Jelaluddin Rumi, Hafiz, Shabistari and Saadi. I have included selections from many of them in *Desert Wisdom*.

Q: *Have you travelled to the Middle East ?*

NDK: Yes, a number of times, and I keep up correspondence and connection with colleagues there. In September 1993 I co-lead a citizen diplomacy trip there to introduce Westerners to Middle Eastern people first hand. The journey happened to coincide with the signing of the initial PLO-Israel accords, and as you can guess, there were many mixed reactions.

Q: *What was your experience then ?*

NDK: Euphoria and dread, hope and fear ruled the reactions of people whom we met in Israel, the Occupied Territories and Jordan. The general consensus seemed to be that things could get much better, or they could get much worse. What would make the difference?

One striking comment came when we were in the middle of the Christian quarter of Old Jerusalem. There we met with the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop, Dionysius Behnam Jajjawi who, according to his tradition, is the direct successor to St. James as first bishop of Jerusalem. His monastery occupies the original house of St. Luke, where it is said that Mary, Jesus' mother, also lived for awhile. Currently the monastery is virtually empty. A native Aramaic speaker now in his sixties, Archbishop Jajjawi had lost most of his congregation to war, dislocation and emigration.

He told us of first coming to Jerusalem from Iraq, the country of his birth, many years before and said that he had truly been in awe while walking on the earth where so many sacred events had occurred. But as he looked around him, he saw everyone going about their business, each religion (or religious denomination) carving out a little piece of the Holy Land for itself and holding on for dear life.

"My friends," he said, "the Middle East has too much religion, not enough spirituality."

Q: *What then would be a "spiritual" approach to peace in the Middle East ?*

NDK: For this we have to look at solutions that are prophetic and visionary, that work from the inside out rather than the outside in. My ideas have been heavily influenced by one of my Sufi teachers,

the scientist and mystic Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti (Samuel L. Lewis), who died in 1971. He proposed several main points, which I have elaborated and expanded in an appendix to my book. The main points of this program have been endorsed by former U.N. officials like the late Gunnar Jarring as well as Robert Muller. In *Desert Wisdom*, I show the common ground of the Middle Eastern religions. This plan uses that knowledge pragmatically in how it deals with conflicts over sacred sites, many of which are sacred to two or more religious traditions.

First, place all holy places in the entire region under international protection, including the entire Old City of Jerusalem. All people should be protected in their worship and spiritual practice. The Spring 1994 massacre at the mosque in Hebron shows how important such a measure could have been. This part of the plan also involves setting up "safe corridors" so that devotees of all traditions and religions feel safe to travel between all shrines and places of worship. This would establish a spiritual network of prayer and peace, much like the "cities of refuge" in medieval Europe. Because the spiritual life is so important in the Middle East, one must denationalize holy places to both stop arguments about them and secure them for worshippers of all faiths.

Q: *What could happen next ?*

NDK: Regional conferences could be held to resolve the fair use and trade of natural resources in the entire Middle Eastern bioregion. This would include honest discussions about the use and conservation of water, minerals and oil. The political borders and boundaries in the present-day Middle East have largely been imposed by the strategic interests of Europe and the U.S.A. They do not necessarily serve the people of the region, who have artificially been divided into "have's" and "have nots" by outside forces wanting to exploit the resources for their own use. When the people of the Middle East can meet to decide the best use of the earth's resources in their area, then the ground will be prepared for political solutions about land and borders.

Q: *What about the peace talks, secret and otherwise, that we constantly hear about. Are they of any use ?*

NDK: As long as people are talking, there is some value. One of the other points of this peace program is: obtain agreement from all parties in all peace processes to use terms consistently or not at all. For instance, one side's "security" cannot be another side's "terrorism." One side's "dispossessed persons" must be judged equally with another side's. The use of words like "home" and "historic homeland" must be judged by objective criteria and applied equally to all sides or eliminated from the discussion.

Samuel Lewis felt that using words as emotionally-laden weapons to escalate wars of public relations prevented all sides from seriously dealing with each other at the bargaining table. As a student of Korzybski's "general semantics," he also felt strongly that unhealthy linguistic habits, usually associated with politicians, obscured the real problems at hand under a cloud of fuzzy meaning and thinking. "The reason we often don't solve problems," he said, "is that their answers get in the way of our concepts".

Q: So what should the West be doing in the Middle East ?

NDK: The West should officially sponsor cultural exchange on the highest level with the Middle East, including sponsorship of Middle Eastern tours of music, dance and art. It should seek to educate its people as much as possible about Middle Eastern culture in order to diminish racism and anti-Semitism. With the same goal, it should sponsor exchanges of citizen diplomats between West and Middle East (much as was done in the former Soviet Union).

At the same time, the West should support tours of the best of its own folk arts, music and dance to the Middle East. It should ban the export of the worst aspects of Western pseudo-culture to the Middle East, including pornography and movies that exploit violence and fear. We should support all means whereby ordinary people can come together simply to recognize their mutual humanity. Only this recognition will prove stronger than the modern economic and political forces which drive the many apart for the benefit of the few. Ordinary citizens will make peace, not governments. I agree with Lewis' short formula for peace anywhere. He said, "My main peace theme is: eat, pray and dance together."

Q: How did you arrive at the idea for this collection ?

NDK: The idea began with an earlier study I did that looked at the words of Jesus in his own native language, Aramaic. I had the idea that historical Jesus scholars had only been looking at him with one eye open, so to speak, and couldn't see the three-dimensional nature of his words because they were always looking at a language he didn't speak, that is, Greek. Like the other Middle Eastern language, Aramaic adds the poetry, ambiguity and wildness. I had to translate each line of the Lord's Prayer and Beatitudes about seven different ways to even touch all of the possible literal translations from the Aramaic.

For instance, the first line of the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic could also be translated into English as "O Thou, the Breathing Life of All." Or when Jesus talks about "good" and "evil" in the Gospels, the Aramaic words he uses really mean "ripe" and "unripe." These translations freed up the prophetic meaning in Jesus' words, which had become overly literalized in the service of Christian theology. At the same time, this approach revealed dimensions of wisdom and poetry that many Christians have found deeply inspiring. As I traced more of the key sacred words Jesus used in Aramaic, I found similarities to terms and concepts used much earlier, back into Hebrew and even Egyptian, as well as later into Arabic. That led to Desert Wisdom, which also includes many more of these expanded or "open" translations of Jesus' words. One of the most intriguing things I discovered was that, in relation to Jesus' words as the Last Supper-- "This is my blood"--he uses an Aramaic word that can mean "blood," "wine," "juice" or "the distilled essence of the cosmos."

Q: Where did you find an Aramaic version of the words of Jesus ?

NDK:It is in print as the Bible used by Assyrian Aramaic and Syrian Orthodox Christians today. This version is called "Peshitta," because Aramaic Christians believe that it is pure, that is, an accurate rendition of Jesus' words in the language that he spoke. I would say

that it is at least much closer to the dialect he probably spoke than anything in Greek, which is a very different language.

Greek likes to create neat, separate categories for everything: mind, body, spirit, emotions. Inner is not outer. Cause is not effect. The Semitic languages are very different. For instance, Jesus is reported to have said, "The Kingdom of heaven is within you" and in another place, "The Kingdom of heaven is among you." In Aramaic he says the same thing both times, because there is only one preposition that means both "within" and "among." This is an entirely different way of looking at self and other than we live with today.

Q: *How is your work being received by scholars in this field ?*

NDK: My work is best understood by other people working in the same meeting place of religion, psychology and ecology. So my colleagues tend to be Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Pagans and scientists whose work challenges the traditional academic and religious boundaries. My earlier work on the Aramaic approach to Jesus has been very well received by Christians, including ministers, priests, members of religious orders and laypeople, who are open to revivifying their tradition through the richness of Jesus' actual words. Most Western politicians and diplomats are nervous about diversity--they would rather believe that everyone acts from the same motives that they do. Most religious authorities are equally nervous about giving credence to people's individual spiritual experiences. Most academic authorities, while giving lip-service to diversity, are unwilling to challenge their own Western model of dissecting, dividing and analysing everything into mental concepts, leaving no room for feeling or personal experience.

Q: *What has been your personal experience doing this work ?*

NDK: I have learned that my choices, and I believe our choices, come down to simple things today. I can choose love or I can choose separation. I can choose hope or I can choose fear. These choices are not made on the basis of facts, news stories or so-called objective scientific proof. We make these choices based on our inner resources of strength, harmony and peace, which are constantly challenged. I have discovered that these inner resources can be gradually cultivated and increased. At the same time I recognize that there will always be a part of my being totally wild and free, which I continue to explore.

Q: *Who do you think will be interested in Desert Wisdom ?*

NDK: People looking for new sources of inspiration and for ways to develop their own inner resources. People looking to recognize what has been of value in their own Western religious or secular upbringing, but willing to leave what has not been of value behind. People who wonder, as I do, why the Middle East has been at the "middle" of our secular and spiritual lives for the last two thousand years or more.

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