

The Key in the Dark: Self and Soul Transformation in the Sufi Tradition

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Once upon a time....

It is late at night. The legendary wise fool, Mulla Nasruddin, is crawling on his hands and knees under a corner street light. A close friend discovers him and, thinking that Mulla may be a little drunk, tries to help:

"Mulla, let me help you up! Do you need help to find your way home?"

"No... no, my friend.... I've lost the key to my house. Here...get down on your hands and knees and help me look."

Groaning, Mulla's friend lowers himself onto the hard pavement and begins to crawl around. He makes a thorough search, peering into all the crevices in the cobblestones, gradually and laboriously widening his search. After what seems like hours, his knees are aching. No luck.

"Mulla, I've looked everywhere within thirty feet. Are you sure you lost your keys here?"

"Noo....actually, I think I lost them about a block away, over there."

"Mulla, Mulla-- you idiot! Why are we wasting our time here then?"

"Well, the light was better here...."

Sufism is a tradition of contrasts and paradoxes. To understand it, one must go beyond stereotypical images of turbans, long robes and whirling dervishes. While Western culture has taken Sufi poetry and teaching stories, like the one above, to its heart, it tends to see them as entertainment, divorced from their original educational and therapeutic context. This is not wrong, because the stories and poetry convey truths that the subconscious mind recognizes, even if the conscious mind does not understand them. At the same time, Sufism presents a very profound psychology, which aims at self-realization, which it defines as becoming a fully human being.

This article aims to show how psycho-spiritual theory and practice from the Sufi tradition can inform a person's psychological healing and soul journey. It begins with a necessary, although brief, bit of history and background, then proceeds to examine, from a psychological standpoint, the best known component of Sufism: Sufi stories and poetry. The middle part of the article discusses the view of the soul in the Sufi tradition as a multi-layered, multi-faceted reality, more akin to a community than an individual. Toward the last third of the article, I examine from a psychological view, practical techniques used by Sufi teachers to accomplish these goals, including breathing, body awareness, sound, music and movement, including dance and whirling. This section also contains several brief case studies. To conclude, I examine applications of some of these practices to Western psychotherapy and other integrative health models.

1. History and Background.

The name “sufism” simply means “wisdom” and was first given to a collection of mystical practices and training about 300 years after the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him). Sufis disagree about their origins. Some say that their practices go back to ancient Egypt or previous native mysticisms in the Middle East.

Other Sufis say that Muhammad brought first a mystical-spiritual path (Sufism) that was later formulated into a religious organizational system that came to be identified with the word “Islam,” which simply means surrender to divine Unity. In this view, Sufism is not the esoteric side of Islam (as most dictionaries have it), but rather that the original was Sufism. In this sense, some Sufi groups both in the Middle East and Asia as well as in the West allow practitioners of Judaism, Christianity, Hinduism and other religions to become Sufi students.

Still other Sufis take a more narrow approach and see Sufism as a later mystical offshoot from Islamic religion, with the necessity that practitioners follow particular, culturally defined rules of worship and practice.

In relation to all this, it is simplest to say that Sufism represents a surviving form of Middle Eastern mysticism. The various Sufi orders and schools throughout the world differ in many respects, but are united in their view of the soul, as well as in their emphasis on the need to practice remembrance (called dhikr) of divine Unity. Some Sufi schools use primarily silent meditation, others music and movement. Some use stories, poetry or dreamwork for transformation; others emphasize practical work in the world.

Rather than proceed in the abstract, the next section will examine specific examples of Sufi stories and poetry in order to reveal some of the psychological underpinnings that unite all Sufi approaches. In the same way, a traditional Sufi teacher generally proceeds from concrete to abstract, from experience to concept.

2. The Ecology of Mind in Sufi Stories and Poetry

Traditionally Sufi stories are not artistic performances. Instead they arise within a spiritual community where the mutual search for wisdom demands a response to the moment, not a rehearsed enactment. The stories are often interspersed with spiritual practices or meditations that prepare the way for them or that lead one to the doorway of an experience the story implies.

Sufi stories may express humorous, sad or mixed emotions, but generally they are not moralistic, nor is there one particular point to “get,” as one would in a joke or riddle. The stories may have many layers, and the most obvious ones often give way to the more subtle only with time and experience.

For instance, the story of Mulla Nasruddin that begins this article may seem utterly absurd, but upon reflection, how often do we look for answers to problems in ways that we are used to looking, even if they are not effective? The Western Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti (Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, d. 1971) once said “The reason we don’t solve problems is that the answers interfere with our concepts.” We tend to look with and through our conscious mind, rather than going into the shadow side of our subconscious where the answers may lie. On another level, we can see all of the characters and elements of the story as occurring within one psyche: Mull, the friend, the light, the street corner and the key.

In general, most Sufi stories aim to help us “unlearn,” that is, to go beyond the emotional boundaries and mental concepts that enclose the sense of who we think we are. As we go beyond these boundaries, we find ourselves in the province of what one may call “wild mind.” We discover an inner landscape that is both richer and less controlled than the safety of fixed ideas and rules. Gregory Bateson (1974) called this type of approach “ecology of mind,” recognizing that consciousness operates much more

like an eco-system than anything else, and that “mind” is embedded in an ecological reality, within and without.

Seven hundred years earlier, the Persian Sufi Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi said something similar (Barks translation, 1990, p. 113):

The inner being of a human being
is a jungle. Sometimes wolves dominate,
sometimes wild hogs. Be wary when you breathe!

At one moment gentle, generous qualities,
like Joseph's pass from one nature to another.
The next moment vicious qualities
move in hidden ways.

A bear begins to dance.
A goat kneels!

As we recover a sense of the wild within, we may also come into a new relationship with nature outside us. Each being in the natural world is beautiful and of value in itself: each is a unique face of the inexpressible, Only Being, the divine Beloved.

Specific aspects of Sufi spiritual practice work with the part of our psyche (nafs) called the "animal soul" and even the "plant soul." The arrogance of considering only humanity worthy of an interior life is renounced. One begins to realize that no adequate life of any kind—“spiritual” or “practical”—is possible without considering the whole of our nature, that which we fear as well as enjoy. A predecessor of Rumi, the 13th century Persian Sufi Mahmud Shabistari says in his “The Secret Rose Garden” (author’s translations, 1995, pp. 114, 132):

Look around you!
This world is tremendously mingled:
Angels, devils, Satan, Michael--
all mixed up like seed and fruit!
Atheist with fundamentalist,
materialist with mystic.

All cycles and seasons,
years, months, and days
converge at the dot of now:
“In the beginning” is “world without end.”

This holistic or integrative point of view was also present from the beginnings of Islamic science (a science that did much to help Europe out of its own Dark Ages through the Moorish influence in Spain). As the Sufi scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr (1968) notes in Man and Nature, written more than 30 years ago:

For a humanity turned towards outwardness by the very processes of modernization, it is not so easy to see that the blight wrought upon the environment is in reality an externalization of the destitution of the inner state of the soul of that humanity whose actions are responsible for the ecological crisis....

[Some Western] thinkers forget that the pure monotheism of Islam which belongs to the same Abrahamic tradition as Judaism and Christianity never lost sight of the sacred quality of nature as asserted by the Quran, and that Oriental Christianity and Judaism never developed the

attitude of simple domination and plunder of nature that developed later in the history of the West (pp. 3, 5).

In this sense, Sufi stories and poetry represent an early eco-psychology; this is no doubt the reason why they appeal to the modern Western mind, which has lived for hundreds of years in a cosmology that divides humanity from nature and the divine. One of the main insights of eco-psychology says that much of what we call a personal psychological problem finds its roots in a deep collective denial and despair about what is going on in our natural environment.

In many Sufi stories, we find that our relation to animals and nature is not only symbolical of our inner state, but that we humans can become reflected in the inner lives of animals. To continue the section from Mevlana Rumi begun above (Barks translation, 1990, p. 113):

Human consciousness goes into a dog,
and that dog becomes a shepherd,
or a hunter.

...

At every moment a new species rises in the chest--
now a demon, now an angel, now a wild animal.

There are also those in this amazing jungle
who can absorb you into their own surrender.

If you have to stalk and steal something,
steal from them!

In Sufi stories, the world of animals and nature is inexhaustibly wild and mysterious. According to a Sufi, our human efforts to "domesticate"

nature parallels our attempts to domesticate and deaden our inner life by holding onto the past or projecting ourselves into the future through what Rumi calls elsewhere "imitation." A modern synonym for this word might be "addiction"-- a mindless, unfeeling, repetitive action, which distracts us from the present moment.

Only when the universe breaks through to shock us--through the death of someone close, falling in love, intense joy or a confrontation with some experience we cannot categorize--do we waken from sleep. Again, from a different section of Mevlana Rumi's Mathnawi (Barks translation, 1991, pp. 16-17):

A farmer once tied his ox in the stable.
A lion came and ate the ox
and lay down in its place!

The farmer went out late at night
to check on the ox. He felt in the corner
and rubbed his hand along the flank of the lion,
up the back, feeling the shoulder, and around
the chest to the other shoulder.

The lion thinks, "If a light were lit
and this man could suddenly see,
he would die of the discovery.

He's stroking me so familiarly,
because he thinks I'm his ox."

So the imitator doesn't realize
what he's fooling with. God thinks,

"You fake. Sinai crumbled and split
with jets of blood streaming from it
for the sake of the name
that you say so thoughtlessly.

You learned it from your mother and father,
not from your own experience."

Metaphorically speaking, if all "lions" become our tamed oxen, either inner or outer, who will awaken us and how will the cycle of interdependence continue? Hearing poetry and stories like this speak in a deeper way to the psyche of the listener. They affirm a reality of wholeness that one may only recognize in dream, in the moments between sleeping and waking, while making love, or while fully engaged in play or artistic creation.

3. Views of the Self and Soul

The Sufi teacher works first with story, metaphor, poetry, spiritual practice or music, in order to get beyond and behind the blocks that the conscious mind puts up in order to avoid recognizing its greater (and often terrifying) place in the universe. Then, shifting points of view, she or he may step back from these teaching modes, and give the conscious mind a schema, map or philosophy to help re-orient it in harmony with the subconscious learning that has already occurred.

Behind the seemingly “wild” expressions in Sufi story and poetry, we find a detailed and subtle view of the psyche. A teacher usually gives these maps to students only at a later stage, however, since the conscious mind too easily assimilates a map and mistakes it for the territory itself. For this reason, grand psychological “theories of everything” seem to the Sufi doomed to failure in that they either trivialize a profound reality that cannot fully be made conscious or else fabricate another orthodoxy that becomes a philosophical dogma.

The psychology of Sufism centers on the subconscious self (nafs) and its present and potentially more conscious relationship with divine Unity (Allah) as soul (ruh). This involves what the 20th century Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan (d. 1927) called “the dissolution of the false ego in the real.” The nafs participates in the divine being in the same way that an individual quality of Unity (called sifat) participates in divine Essence (called dhat). Together divine Unity (allah) and Essence (dhat) make up a psychologically male-female concept of the Sacred. Similarly, the individual soul can be said to have both male and female aspects that make up full humanity.

As mentioned in the section on stories and poetry, the nafs itself presents the many different faces of an inner ecology, including human and non-human potentials. In classical Sufi literature, various names for these potentials are given. I have translated these into English equivalents:

a. The “animal/plant soul” presents a instinctual relationship with/as the natural world/cosmos.

b. The “reciprocal, causally-oriented soul” presents a give-and-take relationship of being human.

c. The “harmonious soul” presents a relationship that is surrendered in purpose to the universal sense of purpose pervading the cosmos. This might manifest as an interior, saintly life.

d. The “blessing soul” presents a relationship that actively gives help in the form of what Sufis call blessing-magnetism (baraka).

e. The “knowing soul” presents an illuminated and illuminating relationship to its surroundings, that is one, in which teaching (either verbally or non-verbally) may be present.

Once a student begins to realize, through spiritual practice, the many elements of the inner personality as well as the transpersonal dimensions of soul (which one initially feels as "beyond the self"), he or she may begin to feel overwhelmed. For instance, as a result of doing sacred movement practice in Sufism, more than one person has told the author, "I feel there's so much going on, I don't know what to do with it all!" At one moment, students will begin to feel all that's holding them back, that is inhibiting not only movement but also all areas of life. At another moment, they may feel a very grand sense of the transpersonal, of the whole, of moving in union with another person, the group or the divine Beloved.

Between these two extremes--personal limitation and boundless Unity-- lie all the movement and personality training that needs to be done. As one narrows the gulf felt between personal limitation and divine freedom, one perfects one's movement, so to speak, in all areas of life. Form is an expression of quality of feeling to the eye of the teacher. As mentioned, the nafs does not respond well to concepts or verbal direction; it does respond to pictures, music and body awareness sensations created through movement and dance. A teacher can tell much about students by watching their movements, for the body reflects and holds subconscious impressions and patterns--some helpful, some not.

Both classical and modern teachers of Sufism have regarded the nafs as proceeding through the various gradations of refinement above. These also relate to the refinement of breathing and its responsiveness as felt and shown in the body-mind, or soma. (Suhrwardi, 1979, 127ff. Khan, 1960, 166ff.)

For instance, the first phase of nafs may begin with the soma feeling nothing but its own outward sensations. It does not distinguish inward states or acknowledge feelings; it holds tension and rigidity in absolute and habitual patterns. Psychologically, the conscious self is totally driven by subconscious desires and impressions.

In the following phases, the soma begins to reflect more and more flexibility, until one reaches a stage in which feeling, thought and movement are united. Limitations still exist, but one begins to be aware of the role that personality limitations play within a unified view of the whole being, that is, of the divine Essence (dhat) and Qualities (sifat). At this level of self-acceptance, one becomes both a comfort and help to those around one. The person who has awakened their "blessing soul" (nafs-i-salima) becomes devoted to service and to delivering all others from the tyranny of "ego-self," realizing at the same time that all beings are both inside and outside of oneself. The modern Sufi Hazrat Inayat Khan commented on this, "There is one Truth, the true knowledge of our being, within and without, which is the essence of all wisdom."

Using any sort of hierarchical gradation encourages the tendency to rate one's progress and to become so preoccupied with it that one cannot move forward. This is why a sense of feeling, devotion and compassion for others is cultivated at the outset. Students also continually need to apply it to themselves, as well as realize that one actually goes through "stages of nafs" everyday or even every moment. Nothing is lost. The inner ecosystem is simply known more fully. The development is more like a spiral than a ladder.

Consequently, a Sufi would say that a person's movement becomes more "spiritual" as it shows less domination by ego ("what others may think") and more integration of all levels of self--including body and emotions.

Because beginning students may find it hardest to face their “inner demons,” the Sufi teacher may initially attempt to direct their love and compassion to the transpersonal, the divine “Beloved.” Here also classical Sufism distinguishes gradations of surrender or effacement (fana) in the divine:

- a. fana-fi-sheikh: effacement in the personal teacher or guide.
- b. fana-fi-pir: effacement in a teacher who has passed on.
- c. fana-fi-rasul: effacement in a divine messenger, prophet or human ideal.
- d. fana-fi-lillah: effacement in the being of the One Being.
- e. fana-i-baka: effacement in a resurrection into one’s true nature.

To give an example of the way this works in practice, the American Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti (Murshid Samuel L. Lewis) revived a Sufi science of walking meditation or attunement. In one such practice, the student is encouraged to walk in the footsteps of one's teacher or imagine the rhythmic presence of the teacher as one moves (a practice called tassawuri, or literally, imagination). (Lewis, 1990.)

When the student can easily move in effacement with one person, then that same sense of fana may be directed to a teacher or the teacher's teacher, then to a human ideal (like a saint or prophet/ess), then ultimately to the Only Being. In the final stage of the process of fana one is effaced effaced in one's own personality as it resides in total connection with the divine. This is a state expressed well by the medieval Christian mystic Meister Eckhart: "I see now that the eyes through which I see God are the eyes through which God sees me."

Because of this multi-layered, progressive approach to transformation, the teacher-student relationship takes on great significance. By definition, the student is intended to move beyond the teacher, who is primarily seen as a companion on the path. The relationship is so important that it is universally viewed in Sufism as being empowered by a living chain of transmission (silsila) that includes all past teachers of one's lineage.

According to Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti (1986), the "teacher" is the positive pole and the "student" the negative pole of one battery, which, strictly speaking, is empowered by the only Teacher (Allah). When current flows through the battery, due to the trust between both parties, then transformation occurs to and with both persons. In this regard, Hazrat Inayat Khan deals with Western psychological notions of projection and transference as an aspect of the mental/emotional world, called the "palace of mirrors".

In all cases, it is the teacher's responsibility to stay as clear as possible, using her/his own therapeutic process or spiritual practice to make sense of what is going on. Teacher-student relationships in Sufism, as they have entered modern Western culture, have not been immune to confusion. For instance, certain traditional Sufi ways of relating respectfully, called adab, were linked to an underlying understanding of relatedness to one's community.

These ways were taken for granted in Middle Eastern or Eastern cultures, but are entirely unknown in Western culture, which sets a high value on individuality. Because of this, students of Sufism in the West, may not understand the type of adab necessary for spiritual development, especially where the actual relationship may become shrouded in trappings from another culture. At the same time, teachers from the East, not understanding Western culture, have misunderstood the responses of the their students.

In this regard, Sufism in the West has responded to the example of most professional associations of psychotherapists, who have developed codes of ethics and models of peer supervision to help provide a “reality check” for therapists in these difficult areas of projection and counter-projection, which usually involve the issues of money, touch, sexual behaviour and power. Similarly, several Western Sufi groups have set out ethical guidelines for the proper information of both students and teachers.

To summarize, the Sufi teacher works with practices that empower transformation intensively (through the grades of nafs) and extensively (through the relationships of fana). Each stage of development--nafs or fana--may take years--or may happen in an instant. These developments approach the same point from two different angles. One starts with the personality, the other with the not-personality; both move toward a unified, holistic view of life where actions, thoughts and feelings are harmonized. The Sufis call what harmonizes the diversity and paradox within and without by the simple name, heart (qalb).

As one begins to experience and move with heart, a world is discovered within of sensations that one may not have been allowing oneself to experience. We are back in Rumi’s “jungle” again.

Without this background, it is impossible to properly regard other Sufi spiritual practices involving movement, walking meditation and dance. To simply imitate certain whirling and circle movements in sacred dance performances without pursuing corresponding training in awareness and heart-awakening does nothing but introduce novelty and nervous energy into the psyche. Ritual dance and movement in Sufism do not begin with large expressions but with the smallest nuances of body awareness. The following summarizes the major areas of work in these areas.

4. Practices: Breath, Sound, Dance, Walking Meditation, Turning, and Remembrance

A. Breathing. Even when they don't explicitly refer to the maps above, Sufi teachers direct their students to experience the awareness of breathing as a link between where they feel limitation (nafs) and where they feel freedom (fana). When one feels ones' breathing centered in the heart, this sensation begins to represent the still-point, the place of silence within the conflicting demands one begins to feel. Awareness of breathing in all its subtlety brings one an increasingly refined sense of body awareness similar to that cultivated by Eutony , Feldenkrais and other somatic arts therapies. The student progresses from simple awareness of the breath while walking through awareness of the nuances of breath (its direction, duration and intensity), to a gradual release of the blocks to breathing that inhibit movement and a fully human connection to life.

Breathing practices in the Sufi tradition both elicit greater awareness as well as interrupt habitual patterns that keep one separate from the breath of nature. In the use of these practices, one needs a teacher to ensure that one's habitual, neurotic patterns of breathing are not displaced onto the practice--thereby making the practice itself part of the problem. In the "dance of the breath," as well as the following movement practices, one aims to elicit altered states of awareness, which students then discover as elements of their natural awareness that they have enclosed or limited. The practices do not normally aim to produce "trance" (in the commonly understood sense), but at greater awareness of the interconnectedness of the divine, humanity and nature. In fact, in such states of awareness, the separate naming of these three becomes pointless.

For instance, in a group somatic therapy conducted by the author, using Sufi breaths to the four elements (earth, water, fire, air) and their corresponding body awareness elements, participants reported the following insights and experiences:

Bones (earth): J. wondered whether the earth could support her weight, could it stand it if everyone gave their weight? She had a "feeling of relief that I don't have to bear it all myself." Others breathed a sigh with that. F. felt a sense of relief and comfort. C. and some others noted where they were not willing to meet the earth or where they felt unable to give their weight. For people interested in spiritual things, this sensation often brings up resistance or a great sense of relief as real grounding is felt for perhaps the first time.

Muscles (water): B. began to feel how he was using muscle as bone--to ward off attack. As he began to sense his muscles, he noticed where the fluidity had been stopped--the flexibility. As an administrator, this was a big issue with him. D. said he noticed that he wanted to be both flexible and solid at the same time--couldn't sort out muscle from bone sensation. J. pointed to her chest and said she felt muscles loosening there and a clearer relation of bone to muscle. She said this felt like letting water into the earth, that they could work together for her.

Blood (fire): JM said she felt she had to start with big movements to feel her blood, then gradually found her way to small ones, the beginnings of it. R. had a hard time feeling this, stood still most of the time. D. said he lay down and felt his heart pulsing but moving would have been too much. C. said an image came up that temporarily blocked her way to the sensation: a large black horse with nostrils red and flaring and the face of a frightened woman nearby....

Skin (air): J. said she had a hard time feeling her skin, but then bent over into a ball like a balloon and rose up quickly. She said she felt light-headed. R. said he felt light everywhere but his head, there it was still a solid mass, not skin. C. recalled a sense of both lightness and relief--she can "go off" easily, she feels.

I encouraged the group to experiment with these awarenesses over the course of the day--as they walked or talked with others. Which felt most comfortable--which sensations did they often feel?

Exploring like this deepened over the course of eight sessions and developed into a type of movement awareness and therapy, similar to somatic disciplines like Eutony and Feldenkrais.

B. Sound and Body Resonance. As the breath becomes more perceptible and sensitive, one also becomes aware of the sensations in the body that occur as the breath becomes audible. Again, Sufis place specific emphasis on feeling sound in heart area in order to integrate the feelings of above/below, known/unknown, light/dark. They believe that the resonance of certain phrases and words actually impels increasingly greater awareness of self and the divine. The Sufi science of wazifa (chanted phrases, including the 99 sacred "names" of Allah, the sifat-i-Allah) aims at engaging and awakening the feeling sense to small movements in the body which reveal both self and the divine within. These chants invoke qualities, like mercy, compassion and forgiveness, which can be awakened within one. The chants also include what Western psychology might call "shadow" qualities—shame, misdirection, confusion—in order to communicate with and acknowledge the whole range of feeling experienced by the nafs. According to one Sufi point of view, one misuses sound and chanting practices when they cause

practitioners to enter trance states in which they become less aware of themselves as whole human beings.

The following is from a written case report of a client who used Sufi sound techniques to explore the relationship of his voice to the ability to express and feel emotion as well as to issues of creativity:

When I began, I had a very weak voice although with some melodic quality. I did not feel at all in touch with my body.

Through the use of the various sound practices, I occasionally developed a vague sense of being enlivened and having more energy, but this sensation came and went. About one year after beginning, in a group musical practice, I experienced feeling as though sound were coming, not from my vocal box, from my a place in the middle of my chest, near the pulmonary center. At the same time, I heard a ringing sound above the musical notes. These, I later found, were called overtones. I also felt a warm, expanding feeling from the heart and a kind of emotional release of joy.

This condition came and went for another 6 months. Then I had another "heart-opening" experience, which was felt as both massive pain and release of tension around the heart; I cried uncontrollably and felt I was coming apart.

Following this, I began to use the primary sound / music practice of finding a note that resonated in the heart, and singing that note every day for 15-20 minutes, using various mantric sounds. At the end of about 8 months, I could always find my way to this sound. At the same time, any catches in my throat, voice or breath that came up I began to re-experience as inhibitions and old memories that prevented me from intoning a natural sound (that is, saying who I was).

C. Walking Meditation. At the same time that he initiated the Dances of Universal Peace (1965), Murshid Samuel Lewis introduced modifications and refinements of traditional Sufi walking practices, which encouraged the ability to distinguish various states of awareness and control them. Since walking is a movement used in everyday life, the walking meditations in this Sufi tradition further encourage bridging the gap between the seemingly divine and seemingly commonplace. Teacher training in the Dances of Universal Peace always includes training in walking meditation.

One source of these walking meditations is a traditional aphorism of the Naqshibandi Sufi order: "Look down and see whose feet are those that walk." (One might compare this with the use of walking meditation during a Zen Buddhist retreat.) In the introductory walking practices, the participant may be told simply to walk breathing "in the feet" or another part of the body, or to be aware of the rhythm of the breath. After becoming aware, one is enjoined to try a different rhythm by comparison, a different direction or intensity of breathing, or a different intention of feeling (for instance, walking toward a goal). One is asked to become aware of any changes in the inner state, and any thoughts or emotions that may arise.

The next step in refinement of the walking meditations involves concentration on breathing in different centers of the body or in attunement to the classical elements (earth, water, fire and air). This involves altering the direction, intensity and duration of the breathing and enlarging the body awareness to notice small differences of perception. For instance, students may be encouraged to feel the elements as the body awareness of the bones/ligaments (earth), muscles/connective tissue (water), heart/lungs/bloodstream (fire) and skin (air). These somatic correspondences were adapted by Hazrat Inayat Khan (Khan, 1962) from

traditional Sufi psychology. Research by the author has confirmed their usefulness in various therapeutic settings including substance abuse education. For instance, a heightened awareness of muscle/connective tissue seems to mimic the somatic effects of alcohol in some cases (Douglas-Klotz, 1986).

Advanced practice in walking meditation uses rhythms associated with the alchemical planets in combinations with elements. Further walking attunement practices encourage the experiences of fana by walking in a breath-movement connection with another person. All of these variations aim at releasing the natural breath and movement available to the participant, so that the devotion elicited by the dance and other practices is available in a useful way throughout life.

The following excerpt is from a case study report of a group using Sufi Walking practices to explore the experience of walking in the city center of San Francisco. The therapeutic issues quickly surface in relation to the experience of both sound and breathing while walking:

We now proceeded another block downhill to the beginning of the financial district. The noise and activity increased. We crossed the street and went up to the large level plaza outside the Bank of America building. Some group members commented on the increased noise there. I asked them whether they could hear the sound of their own footfalls, even with all this noise. Or could they perhaps allow the vibration of their steps to come up through them all the way to the top? Was there any sense of their own unique sound even with all the other noise?

The group members walked off in all directions around the plaza exploring their own sound. In about five minutes we came together again. J said that she felt her steps soften in order to hear them

better. Paradoxically, she said, she needed not to press or tromp down so much in order to feel/hear the vibration through her. D said that she became aware of a vibration coming up from her feet all the way up the backbone and out the top of the head, giving her a completely new sense of alignment. Her eyes were sparkling.

E felt that it was very difficult to reach for her own sound, but it was there if she listened closely. She said that she usually wears wooden clogs which make the sound of her footsteps very loud and which caused people to look at her as she approached. Wearing running shoes, she became aware of how she could listen for and feel the same vibration on a more subtle level. It was a different way of making contact, she felt.

D. Dance. As one becomes aware of the movements within caused by breathing and sound, the prayers and sacred phrases so intoned or sung naturally cause one to begin to move the whole body in rhythm. As mentioned, this unity of intention and action is common to sacred dance in most native traditions. In the underlying native Middle Eastern tradition, one can see the expression of this principle in the story of David dancing before the altar of the Lord in the Hebrew scriptures as well as in the tradition of Jesus dancing with his disciples on the evening before his crucifixion (in the gnostic Acts of John). In the aspect of this tradition that survives in Sufism, one can categorize various types of movements and their effects.

Strictly speaking, the term "Sufi dancing" is a misnomer. The dances most often referred to were originally named the Dances of Universal Peace, and were first developed as a public form of sacred movement by the aforementioned American Sufi Ahmed Murad Chishti (Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, 1896-1971). Lewis was initially schooled and authorized

as a teacher in a branch of the Chishti Sufi order, which was brought to Europe and the United States from India in 1910 by the Sufi Pir Hazrat Inayat Khan. Lewis himself also studied in India, Pakistan and Egypt with a number of Sufi orders including the Naqshibandi, Suhrawardi, Qadri and Rufai. The Dances of Universal Peace use movements derived from the practices of these orders as well as from a synthesis of spiritual dance techniques Lewis derived from his study with American sacred dance pioneer Ruth St. Denis. (Lewis, 1986. St. Denis, 1996)

Toward the end of his life, Lewis began to develop this form of circle dancing with awareness of breath, sound and movement, which he felt could be presented to the public as a means to expand one's sense of the self through devotion as well to promote "peace through the arts." In the later capacity, the Dances of Universal Peace use sacred phrases from most of the world's spiritual traditions, and participants are encouraged to feel the traditions uniting within themselves, in peace rather than at war. Variations of dances using folk-style partner movements encourage dancers to bring this experience into relationships with what the ego-self habitually sees as "others." Because this form of dance was done publicly, forms of imitation without feeling or training proliferated under the general rubric "Sufi dancing," and the term has sometimes come to mean any form of circle dance with singing.

Even such a public form of Sufi movement as the Dances of Universal Peace demand training if pursued over a period of time. Continued refinement of the breath and work with the personality are necessary. Proper teaching of each dance directs participants back to the feeling of the breathing and to the source of thoughts and emotions within. Devotion must be transmuted from a dualistic experience to one in which the subconscious (nafs) is encouraged to develop in the atmosphere of acceptance, expansion and freedom that the dance creates. In this regard, specific applications of these dances have been made for use

therapeutically with various populations (for instance, developmentally disabled or substance abuse groups) or as well as in special education settings. The primary use of the Dances of Universal Peace remains that of an accessible form of devotional group dance in which the gap between participant and performer does not exist. From a psychological viewpoint, they combine movement re-education, transpersonal therapy and community building in a unified form that transcends these names.

E. Whirling and the Sema. Most of the walking meditations developed by Murshid Samuel Lewis also have a counterpart turning practice. The act of turning or whirling with a certain concentration helps focus the breath and one's awareness of breathing within a natural body awareness as the center of balance. During turning, one can no longer visually spot without becoming dizzy, so attention is drawn to the center or element upon which the awareness is focused. One develops by this an independent center of balance that can lead to a sense of "being turned" rather than turning. As one proceeds further, this experience of "not-self" is again revealed to have a home within.

The Turkish Mevlevi order of Sufis also uses turning in a formalized ritual that has been exquisitely developed over the course of 600 years to commemorate the passing of the founding pir of the order, Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi. It was said that Rumi, upon learning of the death of his close friend and teacher, grabbed a pole in the marketplace and began to turn in both grief and ecstasy. Thereafter he began to express the pinnacle of Persian mystical poetry in his writings.

In this formal turning or sema, one's attention must absolutely remain on the breath with a subvocalized form of dhikr. With arms upraised, one palm reaches up, the other down as the turning semazen presents the image of a funnel receiving from the heavens and giving to the earth. In his/her internal prayer, the semazen wishes to receive from the ultimate idealized divine and to bring this awareness fully into the

body. The extensive training involved usually tests the subconscious nafs to the limit, but the beauty of the movement and music helps win its cooperation. As with other forms of Sufi movement, the so-called physical form of the Mevlevi turn is merely the doorway for exploring and re-evaluating one's beliefs, impressions and feelings about the self and God, as one goes through stages of nafs and fana. While this is the most "choreographed" of Sufi movement practices, its choreography is designed for inner effect first rather than its impression on the observer. (Friedlander, 1977.)

F. Dhikr (Remembrance). Dhikr is a traditional form of chanting and movement practice used by most Sufi orders that the author has experienced. Participants usually sing or chant some form of the Arabic phrase La illaha illa 'llahu ("There is no god but God" or "There is no reality but Oneness") or portions thereof as a means of impressing the self with its origin and goal. Dhikr is performed in a variety of ways--seated, standing, moving in a circle or lines, and more or less vigorously depending on the Sufi order and the inspiration of the person leading the practice. The author experienced one dhikr practice with a Naqshibandi order in Lahore, Pakistan in which the seated chant was accompanied by the counting of a sack of coffee beans.

Most orders reserve dhikr for initiates--those who have committed to a path of transformation through Sufism-- although with more Sufi orders now establishing branches in the West, the practice is sometimes done publicly. Nevertheless, there are good reasons to be conservative in this regard. Because dhikr does not focus on qualities (like wazifa) but on the essence of unity, it may be not be initially understood or assimilated by the subconscious and there may be more energy evoked than the body can assimilate without preparation.

In the currently male-dominated societies of the Middle East, this practice is limited to men, and its evolution in this context has focused on

the need to break down certain habitually male somatic rigidities (for instance, around the solar plexus). In more pluralistic societies, forms of dhikr have evolved which use a variety of movements appropriate to both men and women. There have traditionally been women Sufi teachers throughout Sufism's recorded history, though not in all orders or cultures. Some researchers believe that this inclusiveness survives from earlier times in the desert mystical orders of the Middle East in which the aspect of God worshipped was typified as female rather than male (Walker, 1983).

5. 21st Century Applications.

While the more overtly ritualistic elements of Sufi practice may seem difficult to integrate into post-modern psychotherapy, there have been several attempts to do so. A prime example is the work of A.H. Almaas, who has initiated a whole psychological method primarily based translating traditional Sufi psychological maps (Almaas, 1987, 1989, 1990). Another early theoretical foray bridging Sufism and Western psychology was the work on this subject of Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan (1982), the son of Hazrat Inayat Khan.

On a practical basis, the "Soulwork" of Murshid Moineddin Jablonski (successor of Murshid Samuel L. Lewis) combines elements of the Western counselling session with some of the theory and practice of classical Sufism. In a series of sessions, the student or client is encouraged to establish a relationship with her/his own "spirit of guidance" or "high self" (ruh). This "high self" of the student/client, with the help of the facilitator/counselor, helps focus the session of dialogue with various aspects of the "basic selves" (nafs). The counselor/teacher helps maintain the clarity and spaciousness of the therapeutic atmosphere and intervenes to help the "meeting" of the various aspects of self occur in the most beneficial way. This new expression of the Sufi tradition in a counselling

format shows one possibility for the integration of Sufi wisdom and psychology in the future.

The author's own work, which has been described above, has been named "Lucid Body and Voice Awareness." It represents a contribution of Sufism to the integrative field of somatic, or body-oriented, therapy and movement re-education.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Sufis often hide their theory behind methods that seem simple or intended to accomplish something other than transformation. A number of Sufi practitioners also practice psychotherapy or somatic therapy without any overt disclosure that they are doing "Sufi psychology."

In this sense, one can see the elements of a Sufi approach to psychotherapy or somatic therapy in the following principles and strategies drawn from the practices above:

- a. Initial issues in transformation center on simple goals, like recognizing diversity in feeling/somatic states.
- b. The student/client is encouraged to distinguish these states according to various methods, which harmonize with her/his strengths (initially) and weaknesses (secondarily).
- c. Experiments or interventions may include sensitivity to body awareness elements and centers, especially the heart center.
- d. Therapeutic goals aim toward the student/client discovering her/his purpose in life as a process of inner empowerment that focuses on the "future" as a motive force in life. This empowerment begins with a concentration on clearing a sense of somatic space within and creating a focused sense of clarity. Further developments again focus on the spiritual heart as a center of empowerment.
- e. Further goals aim toward the student/client experiencing healthy options for relating to self and others. These broaden the realm of possibilities for both the self and soul aspects of her/his being. One tests

out one's realization first through "practice" with one's teacher / therapist, that is, within the therapeutic relationship. The work then broadens to the client's larger community and finally with the world at large, both human and natural.

f. The heart awareness of the student / client is "tested" by its ability to be large enough to embrace more and more love for self and other. The heart usually goes through a stage of being "broken" as it confronts its own limitations and the limitations of its own self-concept. The heart then re-discovers itself, after various stages, as being part of the heart of Unity.

Through these elements and others, Sufism will continue to empower further developments in Western psychotherapy, whether these are recognized by the name "Sufi" or by the simple perception of their underlying basis, the translation of "Sufism": wisdom.

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