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UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF *TASAWWUF* IN THE CONTEXT OF ISLAMIC TRADITIONS: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Islam is a complete way of life. It tells an individual about the purpose of his creation and existence, his ultimate destiny, his place among other creatures and more importantly, it provides him with guidance to lead a balanced and purposeful life which will enable him to avoid the Hell-fire and be rewarded with a place in Paradise in the life after death. A person, who freely and consciously accepts the Islamic way of life and sincerely practices it, is called a Muslim. Islam has two sides esoteric (batin or internal) and exoteric (zahir or external) and the two sides are interdependent. This relationship can, perhaps best, be described in its three aspects known as Shari'ah, Tariqah and Haqiqah. The outward religion or (exoterism) known in Islam as the 'Shari'ah' may be linked to the circumference of a circle. The inner truth or (esoterism) that lies at the heart of religion and is known in Islam as 'Haqiqah' may be linked to the circle centre. The radius proceeding from circumference to centre represents the path and is known as 'Tariqah' that lead from outward observance to inner conviction, from belief to vision. Tasawwuf is a mystical tradition of Islam based on the pursuit of spiritual truth. In Qur'anic language, it is called 'Tazkiyah' and in Prophetic language it is called 'Ihsan'. So Tasawwuf has its root in the Qur'an and Hadith of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). It is, therefore, in no way, discordant with the Shari'ah. In true sense, Tasawwuf is the combination of Shariah, Tariqah and Haqiqah which finally leads the blessed souls to gain the gnosis of Allah (s.w.t), known as Ma'arifah. So In fact, Tasawwuf is the life and soul of Islam and entails high spiritual aspirations of Truth. It is a process of purification of the heart, purgation of self and illumination of the soul and finally attaining unitive life with Allah (s.w.t). This paper is aimed at highlighting the concept of Tasawwuf in the context of Islamic traditions and its role in purification of soul for gaining the pleasure of Allah (s.w.t) in this world as well as hereafter.

KEYWORDS: *Islam, Qur'an, Hadith, Sufism, Tasawwuf*

INTRODUCTION

Many books have been written on the spiritual life in Islam, especially concerning *Tasawwuf*. Each of them has touched a different facet, because the phenomenon of *Tasawwuf* is so wide and its appearance so variable, so that nobody can venture to describe it fully.¹ The science of *Tasawwuf* developed as a distinct branch of Islamic knowledge and practice, which focused on the spiritual dimension within Islam. Thus, the very

name of *Tasawwuf* became controversial. A never ending battle began to determine whether *Tasawwuf* is an innovation or not. This has yet to end.

Tasawwuf is generally understood by scholars to be the inner or mystical dimension of Islam. In English it is called Sufism or Mysticism. As a spiritual and esoteric dimension of Islam, the mystic theory and Practice is entirely based on the holy *Qur'an*, the *Hadith* and *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). In true sense, it is the combination

of *Shariah*, *Tariqah* and *Haqiqah* which finally leads the blessed souls to gain the gnosis of Allah called *Ma'arifah*. In fact, *Tasawwuf* is the life and soul of Islam and entails high spiritual aspirations of Truth. It is a process of purification of the heart, purgation of self and illumination of the soul and finally attaining unitive life with Allah (s.w.t).² *Tasawwuf*, in fact, implies how best one should perform one's obligatory duties and supererogatory acts and was understood as "*Ihsan*" during the time of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) and his companions. *Tasawwuf* has its root in the *Qur'an* and *Hadith*. It is, therefore, in no way, discordant with the *Shari'ah*.³ *Tasawwuf* (Sufism) means spiritual progress of devotee from the initial stage of Islam to the final stage of *Ihsan*. *Tasawwuf*, which literally means mysticism, can be defined as the doctrine of an immediate spiritual intuition of truths believed to gain the love of Allah through complete adherence to the teachings of *Shari'ah*. Thus, the Islamic spiritual life based on the actions of the spirit such as asceticism, regular worship, abstention from all major and minor sins, sincerity and purity of intention, love and yearning became the subject-matter of a new science called *Tasawwuf*.

Origins of the Word 'Sufi'

On the origin of the word of *Sufi*, and its adoption, there are many different opinions among the learned. The majority of the scholars are of the opinion that the word Sufism (*Tasawwuf*) comes from the word '*Suf*' which means wool. This is because most of the early pious people used to wear woolen clothing as a sign of their detachment from and discomfort with the material world. That is why they were called '*Sufi*', only goal being to please Allah (s.w.t). The following is a list of the various Arabic and other words which are supposed to be the origin of the word of *Sufi*.

1. **Safa:** means cleanliness, particularly the purity of heart, soul and actions of an individual.
2. **Ahle Saffa:** During the life time of Prophet (s.a.w) there were certain ascetics (*Zahids* and *Abids*) whose sole occupation in life was nothing but continuous study and recitation of the *Qur'an*, meditation, prayers and absolute devotion to Allah (s.w.t) in the Prophet's mosque at Medina.
3. **Suff:** means row [Those Muslims who always tried to offer their *Namaz* (prayers) in the coveted first row of the 'five daily' congregations during the Prophet's (s.a.w) time].
4. **Soofa:** It is the name of an old Arab tribe who were dedicated to the service of Kaabah.
5. **Soofia:** It is a Greek word which means Divine knowledge.

Tasawwuf in the Islamic Traditions

In *Qur'anic* terminology, *Tasawwuf* is known as *Tazkiyyah* (purification of soul) and in *Hadith* terminology, it is known as *Ihsan* (you worship Allah as you see Him, even though you does not see Him, He always sees you). Allah says in the *Qur'an*:

"By the soul and the proportion and order given to it and its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right: - truly he succeeds [in his spiritual moral struggle] who subjects it successfully to tazkiyyah and he fails who corrupts it".⁴

Literally, the word *tazkiyyah* means the removal of undesirable growths and impurities.⁵ As a spiritual-moral term, it denotes the self-imposed effort of moral agent for eradicating those tendencies within the human self, which form obstacles in the path of moral development.⁶ Thus, it can be understood that the eradication consisting in resolving the conflict between good and evil that rages in human soul.

Tasawwuf is a way of spiritual realization and attainment of sanctity and gnosis of Allah (s.w.t). It is the esoteric and intrinsic aspect of Islam and is the heart and the core of revelation and Prophetic teaching. It is the inner dimension of Islam. It is purely an Islamic discipline, which builds up the character and inner life of the Muslims by imposing certain ordinances, and duties, obligations and commitments, which may not be abandoned or given up in any way by any individual. Its doctrines and methods are deeply and firmly rooted in the *Qur'an* and *Sunnah*.

The thematic aspects of *Qur'anic* spirituality are: attentiveness, intention, inner discipline, gratitude, generosity, personal responsibility and the struggle for justice-represent only a small sample of the important issues the scripture offers for consideration. Many similar themes, presented in a different form, lie at the heart of Islam's second documentary well spring, *Hadith*.⁷

All *Sufis* obey the *Qur'an* implicitly and also follow the prophet's traditions (*Hadith*) rigidly. According to them, *Tasawwuf* means "unbounded love of Allah (s.w.t) and selfless service of His creation under *Shariah*," because there is a clear indication in the Holy *Qur'an* that

"Allah loves those who love Him."

When a *Sufi* reaches the pinnacle of his career, he is above all worldly things. He then enters the domain of the "Spiritual World" the existence of which is as certain as this material world, *Ma'arifah*. Thus when the lover and the 'Beloved' are in divine harmony and unity, there is nothing else but a serene happiness-a rare type of happiness which no pen or human intellect can describe on paper. It is this reciprocal link of divine love between Allah (s.w.t) and an individual which is called *Ma'arifah* in *Sufi* dialect.

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, in his *Tarjumaan-ul-Qur'an*, clarifies this point nicely. He says:

"Again and again the *Qur'an* has revealed the fact that the relation of Allah (s.w.t) with man is nothing but a relation of their 'mutual love'. In appreciation of man's own wonderful creation, Allah (s.w.t)

gracious expects nothing but his love and devotion only”.

A true devotee of Allah (s.w.t) thus becomes His true lover. And, at this stage, the devotee is very near to Allah (s.w.t). Having attained the position of Allah's beloved, he soars high in the spiritual World or the so-called “other- worldliness”. And this is the ultimate goal of a *Sufi*—the true meaning of all his devotion and strivings. The *Qur'an* gives a central place to its religious principles in order to guide the conduct of man in his life, and that is why all *Sufis* follow it scrupulously to develop their love of Allah (s.w.t) and win His pleasure and blessings. Allah (s.w.t) says:

“Certainly did Allah confer [great] favor upon the believers when He sent among them a Messenger from themselves, reciting to them His verses and purifying them and teaching them the Book [i.e., the Quran] and wisdom, although they had been before in manifest error.”⁸

As promised, the Prophet (s.a.w) did receive this divine wisdom or the secret knowledge and in turn, imparted and passed it on to some of his very near associates, especially to Hazrat Ali (R.A), who were indeed “the source of Light” or the guiding stars of *Tasawwuf* for the succeeding generations of a particular class of Muslim ascetics who played such a glorious role in the service of mankind at various critical junctures of Islamic History.⁹

In the first three or four centuries of the Islamic era, there was no apparent distinction between a secular scholar and a mystic. Both groups of the faithful were equally prompt to observe all the injunctions of Islam in theory and practice. Junayad Baghdadi (Reh.A) (297 A.H./909 C.E.) was a famous *Sufi* who emphasized that the external path (*Shari'ah*) and the internal path (*Haqiqah*) of Islam are essentially the two sides of the same thing and they are interrelated. He systematized the mystical doctrines and put them in black and white.¹⁰

However, it was Dhul-Nun-Misri (Reh.A) (788-859. C.E.), who for the first time put the doctrines in words and Abu-Bakr Shibli (Reh.A) was the first to preach them from the pulpit (*member*) of Masjid. Sufism teaches renunciation of the worldly pleasures, complete devotion to Allah (s.w.t) and healing of suffering human hearts through cultivation of spiritual forbearance and insight and service towards humanity. It is a way to reach Allah (s.w.t) through the rigorous practices of *Salah* (Prayer), *Faqr* (Poverty), *Zikr* (remembrance of Allah (s.w.t)), *Fana* (annihilation), and *Safa* (Purity of body and soul). Some important components of these practices are *taubah* (repentance), *Zuhd* (asceticism), *tawakkul* (Trust in Allah (s.w.t)), *reza* (Will of Allah (s.w.t)), etc. In this pursuit, a *Sufi* move through different station of mystical experiences.¹¹

The interpretation of the word “*Sufi*” can best be understood when placed in the context of the

historical evolution of Sufism and *Sufi* brotherhood. It is a discipline, which aims at appropriating the spiritual mysteries or dimensions of Islam. Sufism lies at the centre of religion. It aims at the personal experience of the central mystery of Islam. i.e. *Tawhid* (unity of Allah). There is nothing to be worshipped, nothing to be adored Allah (s.w.t). Sufism becomes a mediator between *Shari'ah* and *Haqiqah* precisely as it intends to push an individual to the extreme of what he only accepts intellectually. At the beginning Sufism and Islam is general rest on the same ground of *Shahadah*:

(There is no God but Allah , Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w) is the Messenger of Allah.)

However, while a person embraces Islam and becomes a Muslim by simply repeating the *Shahadah* and believing in it, a *Sufi* on the other hand, is one who explores its ultimate meanings and tries to live up to them. *Tawhid* (Oneness of Allah (s.w.t)) which is doctrinally the essence of Islam is contained in the first part of the *Shahadah* (*La-Allah Illal-Allah*). A *Sufi* starts contemplating on what he really means to actualize it. It is only in the second part of the *Shahadah*.

Purpose of *Tasawwuf*

- The goal of Sufism is not to acquire an intuitive knowledge of reality, but to be a servant of Allah (s.w.t). There is no stage higher than the stage of servant-hood (*abdiyat*), and there is no truth beyond the *Shari'ah*.
- The object of *Sufi Tariqah* is nothing but to produce conviction in the beliefs of the *Shari'ah* and to facilitate the observance of its rules.
- The experience of *fana* and *baqa* is the essence of *walayat*; its purpose is to produce conviction.
- Visions and auditions are not the end of the *Tasawwuf*; they are mere shadows, and Allah (s.w.t) transcends them absolutely.
- *Walis* are of two kinds: those who remain absorbed in Allah (s.w.t), and those who are returned to the world. The latter are superior to the former.¹²

Religious Attitudes of *Tasawwuf*

The other *Hadith* is a long *Hadith* commonly known as “*Hadith Jibrael*” It has been reported by Umar ibn al-Khattab (R.A). The portion relevant to our discussion is as follows:

*He [Jibrael] said: What is Ihsan? He [the Prophet] said: It is that you worship Allah as if you see Him for if you do not see Him, He surely sees you.*¹³

Sufism can also be explained from the perspective of the *three* basic religious attitudes mentioned in the *Hadith*. These attitudes are as under:

1. *Islam*
2. *Iman* (faith)
3. *Ihsan*

1. **Islam:** The attitude of *Islam* which has given the umbrella name to the Islamic religion which means “submission to the will of Allah”. This is the minimum qualification for being a Muslim. It implies an acceptance even if only formal of the teachings contained in the holy *Qur’an* and traditions of the Prophet of Islam.

2. **Iman:** *Iman* (faith) is a more advanced stage in the field of religious experience. It designates a further penetration into the heart of religion and a firm faith in its teachings.

3. **Ihsan:** The third stage is the highest stage of spiritual advancement. At this stage, the devotee has such a realization of the religious truth which amounts almost to their direct vision. Sufism may be defined as the spiritual progress of a devotee from the initial stage of Islam to the final stage of *Ihsan*.¹⁴

Thus, *Iman* is essentially faith in divine unity (*Tawhid*) and Islam mean submission to divine will. *Ihsan* operates upon these two fundamental elements of the religious and transforms, them into what is called *Tasawwuf*. Thus, Sufism can be said to be a movement, which aims at making Muslims good or better Muslims. It is a call to them to actualize truly and internally those teachings of Islam they have accepted only formally or intellectually as a part of their inheritance. Throughout the history of Islam, Sufism has been the standard-bearer of genuine religiosity and spiritual advancement in the Muslims societies. Sufism has made Muslims a living reality infused with the depth and strength of spirituality.

Stages of *Tasawwuf*

The beginning of *Tasawwuf* is *Iman* (faith) and is based on the four pillars of Islam:

1. *Shari’ah* (Theology)
2. *Tari’qah* (Methodology: Acting upon Theology)
3. *Haqi’qah* (Truth)
4. *Mari’fah* (Gnosis of Allah)

A Brief description of each of these pillars is given as under:

1. *Shari’ah:*

Shari’ah is the first stage or the first stage of law in which the traveller has to acquired the outward or exoteric knowledge (*‘ilm*) of the canon of Islam and wherein a devotee has to follow strictly the rules of religion. In *Shari’ah*, the practicing Muslim or a *murid* (disciple) observes the *Sha’ar* and the rites of Islam; ever breathes his *Shaikh* in mind; in him effaceth himself through meditation; maketh him his shield against evil thoughts and regardeth his spirit as his guardian spirit.

2. *Tari’qah:*

Tari’qah is the second stage in which the first exoteric secrets and practices of the order are imparted to the traveller and wherein a devotee has to follow blindly the command of his mentor (*pir* or *Murshad*). In *Tari’qah*, the *murid* attaineth power; centereth on Sufism and abandoneth the observance of religious forms, exchanging outward for inward worship. Without great piety, virtue and fortitude

(based on knowledge of the dignity of the soul of man) he cannot attain this stage. However, it becomes the duty of the *murid* to abide by the orders and commands of his *Pir*, but with happy moods.

3. *Haqiqah:*

The third stage is *Haqiqah* in which the traveller is rewarded for his efforts by the vision of the beatitude of Allah (s.w.t). It is the name given to the inner truth or inner reality. The *murid* or the practicing true believer has become joined to Truth (Allah), in whom he sees all the things and does realize His secrets. This is effacement in Allah (s.w.t).

4. *Ma’arifah:*

The fourth stage is the *ma’ari’fah* or the stage of esoteric knowledge in which the traveller realizes the Divine Individuality within himself and wherein a devotee follows strictly the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w). The *murid* has attained to supernatural knowledge and is, therefore, equal to the angel. The *Shaikh* leads him to Prophet whom, in all things, he seethe. This is effacement in Prophet of Islam.¹⁵

The Prophet (s.a.w) said that *Shar’iah* is my word (*Aqwaal*), *Tari’qah* is my deeds (*Afa’al*), *Haqiqah* is my spiritual state (*Ahwaal*) and *Ma’arifah* is my secret (*Asraar*). By attaining perfection in the observance of Islamic law (*Shar’iah*) through a pious conduct one may move to the path leading to divinity (*Tari’qah*) and then onward he passes on to enlightenment (*Ma’arifah*) and lastly to the attainment of the high point of human existence, (*Haqiqah*).¹⁶ The *Shari’ah* is concerned with the observance of the outward practices of religion, while *Haqiqah* is concerned with an inward vision of Divine Power.

According to *Sufis*, *Ma’arifah* is the attitude of the man who acknowledges Allah (s.w.t) in his name and attributes; who is sincere in his action, who tries himself to be away from the blameworthy traits of character and from weaknesses and lets his heart dwell with Allah (s.w.t). When a *Sufi* becomes alien to other creature, free from the frailties of self; in his innermost being he is in continuous communion with Allah (s.w.t) and at each movement truly comes back to Allah (s.w.t). When he has knowledge of Allah (s.w.t) by receiving His secrets concerning the operating of His decrees, then he will be called *Arif* and his condition will be called *Ma’arifah*.

CONCLUSION

Thus from the above overview it can be said that *Tasawwuf* is a philosophy of love or say a philosophy of Allah-intoxication. The main aim of life, according to the *Sufis*, is to attain nearness (*qurb*) to Allah (s.w.t). According to some of them, the aim is rather to merge the individual soul into the universal Soul. They believe that the disappearance of consciousness of separate selves and continuous existence into the being of Divine Self is the goal of *Tasawwuf*. It is as old as Islam itself. Rather it is an integral part of it. *Sufi* tradition includes in itself the

doctrine of love of Allah (s.w.t) and service to humankind and therefore, such peculiar character has become its hallmark through the centuries. In reality, *Tasawwuf* is a practical dimension of Islam that promotes the intimate relationship between Allah (s.w.t) and an individual. The purpose of *Tasawwuf* is to seek the pleasure of Allah (s.w.t). There are two things after that; knowledge of the way and acting upon them. So, the way is only one, i.e., fulfilling the outward and inward rulings [of *Shari'ah*]. There are two things, which help on the way; one is the amount of *dhikr*, which can be done regularly; second, keeping the company of the people of Allah (s.w.t) as much as one can. If one does not have the time for doing this abundantly, then studying the biographies and statements of the pious is a substitute for this. Two things are obstacles on the way or from the objective, sins and engaging in useless activities. There is one thing, which is a condition for all of these to be beneficial, scrupulousness in informing [the *Shaikh*] of one's condition. Now, depending on the capability of the individual, he will reach the goal sooner or later. This is the summary of the "way."

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