

## Healing in the Sufi Tradition

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Where does my journey begin? A useful place to begin to trace it is on a psychiatric ward at the Maudsley Hospital, when I was doing my first Senior House Officer job, about 6½ years ago. I had a patient who was convinced that the window was electrically wired. 'Doctor! It is électrique!' This was at night and I was on call, and although I knew the patient, I was anxious not to get into too detailed a conversation. And so, rather than sit down patiently with him and discuss the various possible sources of electricity, I touched it myself: 'You see, such-and-such, it's not electric. I'm not getting a shock. You don't have anything to worry about.'

'No, no, no! That is because you work here. You are protected. If I touch it, I get a shock.'

I realised instantly that we had an epistemological impasse. I should say that the nurses were on my side - which isn't always the case. But I couldn't prove that my patient was wrong. In fact, I had that faint shiver going through my body where I felt I was being slightly arrogant in assuming my patient was wrong, since the basis of my knowledge was probably the same as his. He was relying on his senses, which were probably giving him electric-shock sensations; looking around for possible sources of electricity - goodness knows. But I had the feeling that, except for a difference in assumptions, he was being no less logical than I was. And then my dear friend, Gareth Owen, with whom I was very fortunate to be picked to do on calls, did a study into this which was published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*, I think, about 2 or 3 years ago; he was discussing his findings with me before this and he said, 'Do you know, Athar, people with schizophrenia are more logical than you and me. They just start from a different basis.'

Of course, it depends what you mean by logic; and, not being anything more than an extreme dilettante in classical philosophy, I won't begin to probe into the notion that the ancient Greek notion of logic was radically different from what ours has become. But what Gareth meant was sequential reasoning. He was using the word 'logic' partly to tease me, and partly because we both enjoyed the joke. But the principle, I like to think, is the same - that we all start with our senses and reason; and for my patient, in my opinion, that wasn't quite good enough; for me, in my patient's opinion, that was definitely not good enough; and I started reflecting more avidly on whether there might be another basis to knowledge.

This is where another strand of my life comes together. I suppose that I grew up in a family where we were always on the edge of things, in the sense that my parents were people with unusual life stories, really from birth; and I suppose both of them showed a quiet determination to try to see things as they ought to be, rather than see things as they - let me put that another way - to try to see things as they felt they were, rather than things as they were told they were; so there's a certain idiosyncrasy developing there, I suppose, a certain unwillingness to be part of a group mind.

When I was young, from a very early age, I was absolutely fascinated by religion. I remember at the age of 4 years old, wandering around the Infants' School playground praying. That was partly because I was too shy to go up to people and make friends, but it's quite interesting that I was choosing to pray rather than do something else; so, early childhood fascination. And all of these various strands led me to look for people who were, ideally, interested in mental health; who had different approaches to epistemology; and who might be interested in religion, and possibly overlap with my own religious identity, which, for want of a better label, I would then have called Muslim. All of this led me to working with Sufis, to studying Sufis; because, from my study of Sufi epistemology, especially Ghazali's book, *Niche of Lights*, I had an inkling that their notion of epistemology was extraordinarily different from that incarnated in science, and possibly complementary to it. At any rate, like a pauper, I felt that even if the coins turned out to be fake, they were worth picking up and looking at; and it seemed fascinating enough for me to do a PhD on the grounds that even if I found nothing of worth, I would at least have learnt something about myself.

Over the last 3 years I've been doing this PhD. I spent one of those years working as an editor for a medical journal, which was an exploration of the way scientific method is generated, how notion becomes received fact. I certainly developed my understanding of scientific method as a result of that; and I don't for an instant wish to dismiss it, because I think that would be uncouth, not to mention unhelpful: since I think that my glass, my microphone, and my ability to move my hands in the right order all owe at least something to scientific method. But, in my conceit, I boiled down scientific method to a few steps, which were: you have a hypothesis; you decide how you're going to test the hypothesis; you test it, you come up with the finding, and you iterate it to what might be called a subsidiary or a neighbouring hypothesis. And most of this is quite systematic. I think it may have been Polanyi who said that most of science is bottle-washing, in the sense that once you have a hypothesis, and you know how to do it, the rest is just quite systematic.

But the difficulty, of course, lies in the hypothesis. We have a whole world of infinite stimuli, with literally infinite ways of looking at things. Even the

pinpricks of our eyes, let alone our other senses, allow us to see so much, let alone the extra tools we get through, the microscope and the telescope, let alone infra-red and satellite vision, and all these other things. So how on earth, from all this infinity of stimuli, do we decide what's interesting? I suddenly developed a tremendous sympathy for the mediaeval theologians and scholastics who were mocked for asking how many angels could stand on the head of a pin. Because, of course, once one is interested in religion, then that might conceivably be an important question conceived narrowly - whereas mere modern questions about how to dig earth for uranium and burn it, for instance, and put it somewhere else, might seem exquisitely futile, particularly as you then use up all the uranium, and then haven't got any left.

I met a lovely man on a train the other day, who said, 'It's all about sunlight.' Of course, I focused in on him and he said, 'Well, coal, that's buried sunlight: and we're burning it all. We're using all the sunlight we had stored up, all those millions of years, and there's none left; there's going to be none left. We're using up all the sunlight.' And I thought, well, that was quite a good way to look at things: that we're taking various bits of earth and moving them elsewhere, and burning various bits of what he delightfully called stored sunlight. And so what we regard as important really depends on our dreams. I can't think of a better comment on this than Captain Sensible, who in my gilded days of halcyon infancy, released a cover version of *Happy Talk* from *South Pacific*, and said, 'You've got to have a dream. If you don't have a dream, how you going to have a dream come true?'

How did my dreams come true? How would my dreams come true? I'm wary that this may be rather unkind to the scientific method, yet all we are doing is projecting our dreams onto the universe; essentially all we're doing is seeing ourselves, as in the poem by e e cummings,

*maggie and milly and molly and may  
went down to the beach (to play one day)*

And it concludes,

*...whatever we lose (like a you or a me)  
it's always ourselves we find in the sea*

I didn't know this about Sufi method when I began, and I'm only just beginning to discover it in the last few months, having waded through various piles of text that only served to obscure my vision: partly because what is written as Sufi isn't necessarily Sufi; partly because people who claim to be Sufis aren't always Sufis; and partly because you read a text through the eyes of who you are.

I found that when I looked at sacred text, and similarly when I looked at everyday life, what I saw, what I perceived, was filtered by sometimes quite restrictive structures of identity and personality, so that even had I been working with the utmost holiness, I might have experienced it as a bus ticket, or something similarly legendarily minute; and certainly in my own life, it was like that wonderful line from *Harvey*, where the psychiatrist says '*Flyspecks! I've been wandering around all my life seeing flyspecks, and divinity was standing on a lamp post*', or something like that.

The Sufi method, as I very limitedly understand it, is all about self-effacement: in other words, the idea is to become transparent to reality. Now, that isn't the same as putting yourself aside, because your self will undoubtedly creep in when it gets the chance. The only way to efface yourself, if this isn't simplistic, is by literally not being there, by being transparent to all around you, in the spirit of love - a wonderful Moroccan phrase, 'invaders of the heart' - so that the whole universe invades your heart, and you perceive it truly, you perceive it with love.

The theological way to put this is that because the whole universe is a divine creation, anything within it ultimately must reflect that divinity: so that if anything were to be known truly, it would reveal infinite grace. There's a wonderful line in the Koran where it says that God is not too proud to coin a parable for Himself even in a gnat. So, if you were to know and love a gnat truly, you would see divinity. At the risk of being simplistic, the rest is just technique; and what the Sufis claim to do is to teach technique, although there is an unravelling there, which I may come to later.

I was looking for a theme to pin this on, something to give structure, and the structure that came to mind was what might be called the ground-phrase of Sufi studies, which is, in Arabic, *La ilaha illa'llah, Muhammadur rasul-Allah*. This is often glossed as the Muslim declaration of faith. I hope that I'm going to be able to unpick that statement, because I don't think it's Muslim, as the term is understood; I don't think it's a declaration: it has to be an existence. What faith is, I think, is not what the Sufis would regard as faith, from my limited understanding.

*La ilaha illa'llah* - no God except God. The God; that's, among other things, a statement about epistemology, because if we're at all selfish or egotistical, or even if we're operating scientific method in the popularly understood meaning of the term, then we're carrying around pocket gods within us wherever we go: pocket gods of identity, pocket gods of our self-perceived needs: even the notion of our existence separate from others, the notion that we can benefit at someone else's expense, when we are all one, is a fallacy. And of course the irony is that whenever we dive into knowledge, the first thing we look for is identity. Oh great, I'm a scientist; oh, I'm a psychiatrist; oh, I'm studying Sufi

studies now - whereas the paradox is that that very creation of an identity is the one thing that prevents learning. This is the problem with religious fundamentalism; that the primitive psychological desire to adhere, to become something, to be something, is the very thing that prevents one from being anything: and the only way to be anything is to let yourself be nothing, and to just let everybody and everything else come in.

I have some text here on that, which I don't claim to understand, yet makes beautiful food for thought.

*True being is God's Being. Our existence is only the existence of a form in a mirror. You look, you see yourself in the mirror but it is not real, it is only a shadow. The existence of all humanity, of all creatures, of the whole universe, is only the existence of a shadow. If you do not look into the mirror, you cannot see your shadow. But, by looking, what you see is still not more than a shadow. That is not you. You are outside the mirror, quite apart from it. All our claims and opinions are such shadows, such imaginings. It is a pity that you are wasting your time.*

I take that last point as addressed to me, of course. I should say that if ever I point to any human frailties, it's because they're in me. There's something else that I made a note to myself to quote:

*If someone is humble enough to accept his nothingness, then nothing can hurt him. Nothing can harm him. Life will not be a burden to him. He will be light, going lightly upon his way, acting and living unencumbered. God could have created man as a strong creature. However, there is wisdom in His creating him as the weakest. In this way He saved him from the danger of forgetting God. This danger was most virulent in man, because of the gift which God had given him.*

So the idea is that because every individual human being is incarnated with the ability to receive everything, this would create arrogance unless we were perpetually, by the refining process of life, reminded of our weakness: and in this terrible weakness comes an awe-inspiring freedom, because through claiming to be nothing, we can be carried along by the ocean of what is, rather than our illusions of what ought to be, or what we should be. I'm just beginning to explore the notion, though I don't claim to understand it. There is an old saying that to claim to be moral is indeed to be in prison, because once you set up a self-image for yourself, even if that self-image is of someone who is insatiably moral and tries to live up to it, you've lost the ability to see yourself and you'll end up trampling on others without even noticing it.

The second phrase, *Muhammadur rasul-Allah*, really follows on from the first. Literally translated, Muhammad is the messenger of God. Now of course, the question is, whose Muhammad? Muhammad himself told a joke about this, which I'll paraphrase as follows. He was standing there one day, and a friend of his came up and said, 'Muhammad, you're the most beautiful person in the world. I can't imagine anyone as brilliant, as lovely, as you.' And he said, 'Well, you're right.' And then someone else came up to him and said, 'Muhammad, you're the ugliest git I've ever come across. I can't imagine anyone as bad as you.' And he said, 'You're right.' And then the one who was his friend said, 'Muhammad, how can we both be right?' And Muhammad replied, 'What you see in me is what you are. What you see is what you receive.'

To Sufis, Muhammad, as well as describing an individual with a biography, is regarded as the exemplar of the ability to receive everything and everybody. They say that a Sufi must be like the earth: he must receive everything that people cast on him. There are various biographical narratives of how Muhammad used to bear torture, and so forth, without complaint, and forgive his enemies, very much like those in the gospels - the similarity is uncanny.

And so Muhammad also represents, as far as the Sufis are concerned, an exemplar of love, inasmuch as this immense receptivity is the ability to receive other people with their essence: the ability to recognise the reflection of the divine in them; and hence, ironically (as a Bosnian dervish told me), to recognise yourself in them. He said, 'the Beloved is the mirror of you. And through love, you come to know yourself; it's the only way to do it; so it's not only the receptivity but the recognition of yourself in the other'. So the term Muhammad is also used to represent that human essence, the very heart of things that receives everything, and that intuitively recognises others.

Different techniques to observe the way of Muhammad are taught in various Sufi orders. But here I must offer a caveat, which is that, by and large, the Sufi orders are held by certain Sufis, who themselves participate in an illusion. You may be familiar with some of them, and they are often identified by their dress. So the Mevlevis will wear a tall hat that tapers off before it comes to a point; the Naqshbandis wear a shorter one that comes to a cone; the Rifais are known as the howling dervishes, though I must admit, the one I met didn't howl much; but this is all, by and large, an illusion.

There's a joke told about this which is, apparently, a true story. There were some monks who were staying with some students of a Sufi and the students felt that these monks, poor things, were greedy and deluded: they wanted to be something, and every single event was reflected onto their identity. One of the dervishes (a student of a Sufi) described them as 'victims of the father of all conditioning'. And so these students decided to play a practical joke on the

monks. They got hold of four sellers of women's underwear and got them to wear turbans, saying, 'Just wear these, and you'll have a sale.' And they told each of the four monks - four monks whom they felt were, poor things, especially conditioned - 'We're going to show you a saint.' But each of them was told separately. So one of them was told, 'Your saint will be the one in the red turban.' The next was told, 'Your saint will be the one in the yellow turban.' And green, and blue. Being avaricious, though it was an avarice for salvation, the monks didn't say anything to the others. And they were told to memorise a chant in the 'saints' native language, which was Punjabi for 'Show me your wares please!' which they were told was some form of prayer.

So, the monks go up to the 'saints', drop on their knees and chant something like, 'In the name of God! Show us your wares please!' and the salesmen open their suitcases to unveil various items of ladies' underwear. One of the Sufis joked later by saying that a Sufi is someone you can identify by a turban. I'm afraid these fellows deserved what they got.

Yet the paradox is that, from my limited touring of Sufi groups, most of them do the opposite of Sufi work in the sense that they create an identity; they create someone to venerate - in the name of their teacher or *shaykh*, people will take liberties they would never dare take in their own name. In just the same way, in the name of humanitarian work, people can take liberties that they would never take if they recognised themselves as being needy. I know this from personal experience; I've done it.

The Sufi orders were originally established around a teacher who, typically, through himself being utterly transparent to others, was able to organise teachings that were just right for the people around him. So Rumi, for instance, is reported as having institutionalised whirling 'in order to stir up certain thick-headed people of Asia Minor'. It doesn't mean that whirling is of any use to people in Kensington or Belgravia; nor does it mean that even if it were, as an exercise, it would be used correctly. I'm not saying people who whirl don't gain from the exercise- probably they gain psychologically, and probably some people do use it 'correctly'. But to associate orders with techniques, and assume those techniques are still useful, is a fallacy. I'm afraid I found most Sufi groups doing, obviously, things that were the reverse of Sufi studies.

I did, however, find one Sufi group that impressed me. Whether it will still impress me in a year's time, I don't know. But I really felt intuitively, and from observing them and comparing what they did with the classics, that here was a Sufi group doing what Sufis are supposed to do. In other words, the whole business of self-effacement: the whole business of receiving everybody, irrespective of religious or ethnic affiliation, irrespective of whether they appear to be a sinner or a saint; the whole business of receiving people on

their own terms, of giving to people everything you can give, of being utterly loving. This wasn't by any means reflected by everyone in the group, but I'll tell you what led me to it.

When I first started dabbling in visiting Sufi groups, most of them were quite obviously idolators, in the sense that they were observing simulacra of what ought to be true, in the same way as nearly every religious group seems to do. You create an image; you observe it, rather than become nothing yourself. And therefore you find, among Muslim and Sufi groups, people suddenly saying, 'Oh, this is what they do in Jordan, this is what they do in Morocco', even speaking perfectly good English in Arabic accents! Whereas the first person I met from this group was a jazz pianist, and the other one, I think, had a long-term mental illness, and used to do a bit of this, a bit of that. But rather than being simulacra, they were more themselves. So the jazz pianist would talk about, 'Yeah, have you heard John Coltrane? A Love Supreme! And I think, at one point he sings, Allah Supreme.' Which, of course, is a bit conditioned; but he was able to enjoy his jazz more, through his discipline and be more himself, slightly more eccentric and Caribbean. My friend who was the long-term mental-health patient was able to preserve her delicacy. They also preserved their humility and wit, rather than thinking they were 'something'.

I found the same, only in spades, when I went to visit the leader of the group, who is known quite commonly as Shaykh Nazim. If you were to go by what you read of him on the internet, you would think he was a complete mountebank. But, of course, that's because everybody receives things in accordance with their own capacity. But when I met the man in person, I was overwhelmed by his capacity to self-efface, and to show me to myself. I thought, this is actually Sufi studies working as it's supposed to in the books; this man is eclectic, as people are supposed to be in books. And so I was absolutely, deeply, deeply moved, and emerged a different person from how I was when I went in: a little more knowledgeable about myself.

I was very happy to have decided to concentrate on this group, so I studied them in Cyprus and in London; I'm hoping to go to Berlin and Damascus before I resume my work, because they're a trans-national group.

Speaking about the very little I know of Sufi studies, I've drawn on so many things, but also on my experiences of this group as to some extent embodying what I'd come across in the classics, but not previously seen in person. And also I've drawn on their texts as being relatively symbolic of the way things are; because the paradox is that when you use old texts, they were written for that person at that time. So I don't think there's any doubt that Ghazali is brilliant; and I don't think there's any doubt that Ghazali was writing for posterity (Ghazali is regarded as the man who reconciled Sufi practice with

religious orthodoxy, and he wrote tremendous guides to love.) But if you read Ghazali as filtered through a translation and without understanding his idiom, you can do tremendous damage to yourself. What he says needs to be understood in the context in which he meant it, which isn't at all the same as the context in which a modern reader will pick up his book and use it. And so the advantage of studying relatively new texts, if they are written by someone who is using the tradition as opposed to symbolising the tradition, is that they may actually be of practical use.

So what are the Sufi techniques? I suppose that because everybody is linked by love, they have to encompass the whole universe. We can begin with the ecology. The dervishes I met, and especially the leader of the dervish group, are very anxious to live in a sustainable environment: if you go to the centre, it's almost timeless, in that they take as little from the earth as possible. They have an organic orange orchard; of course, they buy and sell goods, and so forth: but there is this principle that the earth is your mother, and so therefore you cannot treat the earth with any less respect or grace; and this principle means that you aren't in control of the earth: you're at one with it. At best, because of your knowledge, you have to efface yourself before it, in such a way that you serve it.

This leads us to the etymology of the word 'Muslim', which is something that this group are very keen on. The word 'Muslim' appears a lot in the Koran. It is often taken by modern readers to be the anthropological group who call themselves Muslims. But, of course, that couldn't have been what it meant at the time the Koran came into being. People like Joseph are seen as referring to themselves, in the Koran, as Muslims; which, in the ordinary historical sense, predates the anthropological group who call themselves Muslims. The word 'Muslim' has a very simple etymology. It means to submit yourself, with love, before all that is, before the truth and the essence and the divinity in everything. Another quote from this book:

*To follow Sufi ways, must I be a Muslim? Do you think that Christians are not Muslims? Perhaps they are.*

In other words, anybody who can be at one with others, whether they call themselves Buddhist, Christian, Jewish, or whatever, would be considered, in Koranic terms, a Muslim. I won't go into here what the words Jew and Christian mean in the Koran but again, they're different from the way we use these terms now. It's very interesting. Especially in the study of the Jewish nation, where there are two separate terms to reflect different tendencies of faith and culture: *Bani Israil* to represent sacredness, and *Yahud* to represent culture. Of course, the environment involves being completely just, because there's a certain parsimony in that in order for everybody to fulfil their utmost potential, there has to be a taking away as well as a giving: a taking away, of

course, of illusion; but also a taking away of everything that hinders us from recognising truth, of superficiality. And so things like indiscriminate lust are discouraged. Things like intoxication are discouraged. But here's a good point: if you are intoxicated on pride, that's considered to be worse than being intoxicated on alcohol. There is a statement that backbiting is worse than thirty adulteries, since adultery is to recognise the value of someone, but taken out of context, where it can no longer be used. Backbiting, on the other hand, is to take someone out of context, and refuse to recognise their value; and place yourself over them.

The Sufis have wonderful exercises to control anger (which I began yesterday). So far, so good - I'm not allowed to show my anger for 40 days: 39 more days; that'll be interesting. I also began an exercise where, to puncture my vanity, I had to write down 200 faults of mine. I was so vain, I got up to 77, so, 123 more to go! There's basic stuff like that. I hope I'll have time this weekend...

The inner exercise, which is perhaps the heart of everything, is *thikr* (pronounced 'th' as in 'this'), which is often pronounced *zikr*. The funny thing is that if you speak English, you're much better equipped to learn Arabic than many speakers of so-called Muslim languages because, for a start, the alphabets are more similar. *Thikr* is frequently translated as remembrance (of the divine). It is to be so consumed by love that you're burnt away, and all that remains is the ability to receive.

The favourite form of *thikr* for the dervishes I've met is *darood*, which literally means a prayer on the Prophet. It might be sung, for instance:

*As-salatu was-salamu alayka, ya Sayyidi, ya rasul-Allah.*

In doing that, the essence is in focusing on the Muhammadan capacity, the perfect divine-mirroring essence in everybody. So that prayer, by definition, is a prayer that does not exclude anybody - hence the reason for it being regarded by the dervishes as perfect: it's a prayer, really, for the best in everybody, in every way.

For that reason, the dervishes regard life as being a pilgrimage, in the sense that pilgrimage is a path to holiness. If everything around you is holy, that's a constant pilgrimage. And the real pilgrimage is the way into yourself, until you find there's nothing there, except the perfect beauty of what is.