

The Way of Muhammad



Shaykh Abdalqadir As-Sufi

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Preface

It was with a certain reluctance that I agreed to a new edition of this early work of mine, and this only after some minor editing to remove errors which I can now perceive. The original intention of the work was to show that it was possible to grasp the meaning of Islam in terms of the European existential tradition. Indeed, it is of course the culmination of it. Ironically, the effect of the book was not in the main to open Europeans to Islam, but to restore to those who had gone out of the Deen, especially Arabs, a sense of respect and discovery in relation to Islam. The book is simply a meditation of the five pillars of Islam as viewed by someone who has taken them on and is savouring their meanings. However, now with a lifetime of Islam to contemplate I would want to express the whole matter differently without denying the basic personal truths I tried to indicate in this text. Today the enemies of Islam all explain that the danger of it is that it is not merely a metaphysical construct but is something that affects the whole of life. Yet, after a quarter of millennium of western occupation of Muslim lands, first in colonialism and then by the ethos of technology it can be shown that, tragically, we have abandoned Deen in its totality.

The irresistible magnetic power of Islam which is now about to spread its rays over all the world lies in its Shari'at. Properly speaking the Messenger, blessings and peace of Allah be upon him, abolished the state as the model of societal order. This does not mean he established either anarchy or some kind of mystic individualism, like Buddhism. Where the state was based on canon law and the imposition of order by force, empowered by taxation, the new order established in Madinah was altogether different. The Islamic

community is itself a freely chosen social contract of believers who agree to live within its parameters. The proper translation of Shari'at is a road.

The two dimensions of the Shahada confirm worship as belonging to Allah and obedience being due to His Messenger. The next two pillars, Salat and Zakat, in this sense could also be placed beside the double-Shahada. The worship of Allah and the paying of the only permitted tax, Zakat, go together just as the first and second Shahada do. It is in between these two pillars that Islam sheds light on the nature of governance.

Since worship must be according to what we have been ordered, it is not possible to proceed in 'Ibada beyond a certain point without previously having appointed an Amir. It is precisely at the point of Ramadan that governance becomes inescapable to order the sighting of the moon, to start the fast and to order the collecting of Zakat, which is not charity but something, in effect, taken by power. Thus the collection and distribution of Zakat imply the existence of the Amir. It is because Allah in his glory has shown to us the means of transacting socially and avoiding corruption that Islam is called Deen al-Fitr. It is the transaction of original nature, that is, before corrupted by cultural excess. Allah has permitted trade and forbidden usury. Zakat for this reason cannot be paid in paper money for it in itself is forbidden, being a promissory note, and in the majority of cases one against which no material goods can be matched. The messenger, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, said: 'The miser withholds from others the wealth that is due them.' Therefore banking is revealed as an unthinkable institution both materially by its usurious nature and morally by its perversion of people's evaluation of life.

This touches the nub of the question of the self and what we now call character. The identity is not formed in a psychological non-spatial zone, but rather it is the pattern and web created by the whole series of transactions which form a social nexus. It is in the exchange of goods, in the holding and the distribution of wealth, in the giving up and the taking on of possessions that the self emerges. Therefore, the path to an integrated human identity can only be established on obedience to the commands of Allah and His Messenger. When he left Makkah, the city of his encounter with Allah, glory be to him, to establish the Islamic community, he renamed the neighbouring city of Yathrib, Madinah. Its meaning quite simply is 'the place of the Deen'. When he settled there he established two institutions - the mosque and the market. The mosque and market were identical inasmuch as it was not permitted to establish your corner or part of it for your use. With the foundation of Madinah was established the inevitable abolition of capitalist and socialist society. The inability to create monopoly and the impossibility of an elite to separate themselves, in worship from the people had been assured. Not only papal Rome, but later the Holy Roman Empire and later the European Union of the Treaty of Rome, and equally the Soviet Presidium, the English Parliament, and the American Senate, in the light of Islam were revealed to be tyrannies, the basis of which was not its regal army, but its fiscal subjugation of the masses.

The imperial phase of bankism, which sweetly gives itself a political title, 'constitutional democracy', while still dominating the world in a manner more ruthless than any ancient warlord now clearly exposes the truth that systems control does not work, that the

abolition of trade and its reduction to mere distribution does not work, that the denial of genuine autonomy of peoples at a local level does not work.

It is for these reasons that the modern man must dig deep into himself to see if, after the almost complete conditioning to which he has been submitted, he is able to act at all. The result of a secular liberal education is something akin, socially, to the general paralysis of the insane. However, there are still those who will not accept the role allotted them by the oligarchy of banking – to be helpless and happy members of the faceless consumer mob. After all the progress, after all the modernity, public arenas of modern life are inescapably identical to that of the Roman Coliseum and Aztec Temple.

The response of the free-acting people of this age will be to obey the order of Allah, glory be to him, in Qur'an: "Enter Islam in its totality." (Qur'an 2.206). It can also be translated: "Enter Islam all together."



"If you engage upon travel you will arrive -
and may Allah, praise be to Him, guide you and us!"

(The Makkan Revelations)

– Shaykh al-Akbar

Affirmation

There is only one method by which you can approach the sufic sciences and that is to start, tabula rasa, by putting away the whole world-picture and value structure which has formed you until now and which is completely the result of your social and historical imprinting which you share with millions of others, whatever particular individuality you may imagine you have over and against those millions of others. You have an idea of how things are, and how you are, how things should be and how you should be. Interposed between you and reality is a functioning, fluctuating conceptualisation of existence that, mingled with your personal emotional responses to event and personality, make up what you think is both 'you' and 'your world'.

Any idea of 'god' as an explanation of existence or an arena for your life-experience has to be set aside. 'Religion' (from the Latin – to bind together) as explanation or arena is equally false. Indeed, to mistake the name for the thing named, the category for the indicated, is to make tasawwuf impossible of access. Non-realities that have now crystallised in people's imagination as having some kind of dynamic actuality like history or class or individuality have to be set aside.

The subject of tasawwuf – Sufism – is you.

The subject of tasawwuf is reality.

Let us start from the beginning.

One.

The whole matter begins and ends with an affirmation of One.

But – it will be said – I am another, there is 'two', 'three', 'multiplicity'. John is not Arthur, nor Margaret, Anne. Precisely. It is because of the experiential multiplicity that the science of Unity exists. This implies, therefore, that as you are, you are not grasping the true nature of existence. It is like a perpetual fever, a constant hallucination. Things are multiple, alien and solid. There is not even continuity, yet we persist in it. I am the same one who was here yesterday after a night of dreamless sleep – at least everyone in today's 'dream' confirms this. Otherwise I would be mad. Idiotiki, in Greek, means private. My reality is affirmed socially, so I exist. Unless they are in my dream. Yet when I dream, the objects seem insubstantial, awake they are solid and therefore 'real'. Real means solid. Yet I have physicists in my 'reality' who now tell me that solidity has no reality for them. The object is slipping away from me yet again, and forms are being proved out of existence and I am left holding onto a 'mental reality' in a vanishing world of forms which they tell me is merely dynamic space. The information about my 'real world' has become very odd and contradictory – at times even ironic. The person this world has appointed to assuage my inner anxiety, I observe, is in a worse state than I am. It is to this subject that tasawwuf addresses itself.

Thus:

If you desire to know reality you must know yourself.

You are the key, the only key to reality.

You are nothing but a mirror of reality.

It is enough to reflect.

But, your anxiety – about what is on the horizon, and in yourself – stops you from calm and clear reflection. You desire urgent tranquillising information saying 'it is all proved, everything is really all right, you exist.' Information has for the moment been set aside.

Let us, however, examine a possibility.

The possibility is that there is someone to trust about the very urgent matter of what life is about. Since we are not to be trusted, it must be some very remarkable sort of person. What would be the qualifications of a man to trust in this matter? There would be only

one thing that would make him an 'expert' and that is that he knew how to live his life, utterly fulfilled, in radiant and expansive serenity that left space around him for his community and space within him for his own inner peace. Just as in the legend of Kurosawa's 'Rashomon', we are in a dilemma. In that story a woman has been raped and killed. Each witness tells what happened, but each one has given a version of the event from their own subjectivity. Each story is in the end a contradiction of the one before it. The lover, the bandit, the wife – each has been trapped in a private fantasy that insists on interpreting existence in a way that allows for their 'self-respect' to continue. Finally, a simple woodcutter who is 'outside' the event, with nothing to gain or lose, tells what really happened. But by now the man who sought the truth dares no longer believe anyone, for he has ample evidence that people want their own version of events. When the woodcutter sees the man's dilemma, and what it has done to him – he no longer believes in existence as a dynamic functioning reality, it has proved to be a fragmented, subjective, ever-changing lie – the woodcutter breaks down and weeps. Humanly it is all he can do. Open himself completely to the man, surrender any idea of separateness, interest, dissembling – just give up, unresistant to that moment and its simple truth: his story. Then the man knows that he too has to give in, he has to shed his doubt and his distrust and even his own experience. Somehow life cannot have any continuity again unless there is affirmation of this encounter and its reality. And the two men weep. The moment has been tasted.

This is essentially the starting point of the science of tasawwuf. It begins with surrendering any vain concept that you can think or detector-feel your way out of the contradictions and pains of lived existence – and the surrender, while actually to the Shaykh, is in truth to the Messenger, the one who is sent just for that, to tell you what reality is like, Muhammad, the Messenger of reality.

The necessary qualifications for this acceptance are these same simple and profound ones of his humanity and his deep sanity and his disinterestedness.

No, I swear by what you see

and by what you do not see,

it is the speech of a noble Messenger,

it is not the speech of a poet

(little do you believe)

nor the speech of an occultist

(little do you remember). (Qur'an 69.38-42)

By the pen and what they inscribe,

**thou art not, by the blessing of thy Lord,
a man possessed.**

Certainly you will always be repaid.

Certainly you are on a vast self-form.

So you shall see and they shall see

which of you is the demented. (Qur'an 68.1-6)

Mu'adh ibn Jabal said, 'The Messenger of Allah commanded me saying, "Oh, Mu'adh, I command you to fear Allah, to report truthfully, to fulfil the oath, to act loyally, to avoid wrong actions, to care for the neighbour, to have mercy on the orphan, to be soft spoken, to be generous in extending greetings, to do good acts, to limit expectation, to cleave to the Way, to study the Qur'an, to love the life beyond this world, to be anxious in regard to the Reckoning, to act humbly: I forbid you to abuse the learned, to accuse an honest man of lying, to obey the man of wrong actions, to disobey a just man, to put a land in disorder: and I command you to fear Allah at every stone, tree, or village, and that you show regret for every wrong action, secret or public."

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At this point there are clearly things that do not make sense: fear Allah, to love the life beyond this world, to be anxious in regard to the Reckoning, and to show regret for wrong action.

Surely we desire to be rid of fear – and not simply project it into a god-concept and call it a name?

What lies beyond this world? So far we do not know.

What Reckoning? Surely this regret sounds like guilt?

It is at this point that we must beware of bringing with us the whole value structure that we were prepared to jettison, and applying it just at the point of pretended clarity and lack of pre-conception. If the matter of tasawwuf is sin and repentance and the whole guilt-mechanism that modern man has so sensibly been determined to throw off then we are back to square one. We are quite clear at this stage of our enquiry that the guilt/redemption language of Christianity is a hopeless dialectic superimposed on a neurosis and not dismantling it. Let it be, and let us therefore lay aside these disturbing phrases to see what we make of the rest of the injunctions. Apart from these subjective and seemingly 'religious' ones, all the others are social and benign. A man of these qualities is certainly someone to be open to, someone to copy. Let us look more closely at the picture of the man, Muhammad.

His name means the Praiseworthy.

Muhammad was forbearing, honest, just and chaste. His hand never touched the hand of a woman over whom he did not have rights, with whom he did not have sexual relations, or who was not lawful for him to marry. He was the most generous of men. Neither a dinar nor a dirham was left him in the evening. If anything remained and there was no one to give it to, night having fallen suddenly, he would not retire to his apartment until he was able to give this excess to whoever needed it. He was never asked for anything but that he gave it to the asker. He would prefer the seeker to himself and his family, and so often his store of grain for the year was used up before the end of the year. He patched his sandals and clothing, did household chores, and ate with his women-folk. He was shy and would not stare into people's faces. He answered the invitation of the slave and the free-born, and he accepted presents even if they consisted merely of a draught of milk or a rabbit's leg, while because of hunger he would at times tie two stones around his stomach.

He ate what was at hand, and did not refrain from any permitted food. He did not eat reclining. He attended feasts, visited the sick, attended funerals, and walked among his enemies without a guard. He was the humblest of men, the most silent without being insolent, and the most eloquent without being lengthy. He was always joyful and never awed by the affairs of this world. He rode a horse, a male camel, a mule, an ass, he walked barefoot and bareheaded at different times.

He loved perfumes and disliked foul smells.

He sat and ate with the poor.

He tyrannised nobody and accepted the excuse of the one who begged his pardon.

He joked but he only spoke the truth. He laughed but did not burst out laughing. He did not eat better food or wear better clothes than his servants.

The conduct of this perfect ruler was untaught. He could neither read nor write, he grew up with shepherds in an ignorant desert land, and was an orphan without father or mother. He refused to curse his enemy saying, 'I was sent to forgive not to curse.' When asked to wish evil on anyone he blessed them instead.

Anas ibn Malik, his servant, said: 'He never said to me about anything of which he disapproved, 'Why did you do it?' Moreover his wives would not rebuke me without his saying, 'Let it be. It was meant to happen.'

If there was a bed he slept on it, if not he reclined on the earth. He was always the first to extend a greeting. In a handshake he was never the first to release his hand. He preferred his guest over himself and would offer the cushion on which he reclined until it was accepted. He called his companions by their kunya (surnames) so as to show honour to them, and the children so as to soften their hearts. One did not argue in his presence. He only spoke the truth. He was the most smiling and laughing of men in the presence of his

companions, admiring what they said and mingling with them. He never found fault with his food. If he was pleased with it he ate it and if he disliked it he left it. If he disliked it he did not make it hateful to someone else. He did not eat very hot food, and he ate what was in front of him on the plate, within his reach, eating with three fingers. He wiped the dish clean with his fingers saying, 'The last morsel is very blessed'. He did not wash his hands until he had licked them clean of food. He quaffed milk but sipped water.

Sayyedina 'Ali, his closest Companion, said: 'Of all men he was the most generous, the most open hearted, the most truthful, the most fulfilling of promise, the gentlest of temper, and the noblest towards his family. Whoever saw him unexpectedly was awed by him, and whoever was his intimate loved him.'

He himself said: 'I am al-Qautham,' meaning, 'I am the complete, perfect man.'

It is to this man that we address ourselves in the acquiring of the knowledge of tasawwuf, the science of the self. In submitting to the Shaykh we submit to the man who has himself mastered these aspects of his behaviour that were not in accord with his 'vastness of self-form' which is the Messenger's. We are making no mistakes and we are remaining within the zone of existential recognition. The Messenger is not being worshipped, deified, or made into a symbol. He is being accepted as a witness of how-things-are, as being a completely open person in flowing harmonic accord with existence so that he knows it inwardly and outwardly. A man came to him who was over-awed by his presence and became reverential towards him. He said to him, 'Be at rest. I am not a king. I am only the son of a woman of the Quraysh, who eats dried meat.' His answer to his name was 'At your service.' The Shaykh is simply the man who has fully surrendered his self-form and filled himself up with the clear radiance of this perfect behaviour. The Messenger has said, 'I was sent to complete the noble qualities of character.'

It is essential that this starting point is established. We cannot see clearly, we don't know what is happening, we are looking for a witness of the event of existence we may trust. Madmen, poets, occultists we have by our reason rejected: the witness must be disinterested, and he must manifest the highest social and human qualities. It is not enough that he be some kind of a superior being with superior powers, yogic control over the body and the mind, what is essential is that he is completely at peace and that with that peace he can function in the social setting that is man's ordinary quotidian reality. In the Messenger of Reality, Muhammad, peace be upon him, we find a man with all these qualities. He has left behind a book called the Qur'an, and as yet we have not examined or satisfied ourselves as to the meaning and validity of the book – for the moment we are persisting in a more direct existential search for what we seek. We are staying with the man. He has confirmed our own recognition that we are in no way well enough to recognise reality but somehow we must trust the validity of this affirmation of his serenity and human-ness. He has said, 'Man is asleep, and when he dies he wakes up.' This confirms our initial experience of being somnambulistic, unawake to the true taste of life, but it has in it no consolation, and could be a mere Roman cynicism. However there is another Tradition of his which tells us, 'Die before you die!'