

The Sufi Master as Exemplified in Persian Sufi Literature

By
Seyyed Hossein Nasr

Studies in Comparative Religion, Vol. 4, No. 3. (Summer, 1970) © World Wisdom, Inc.
www.studiesincomparativereligion.com

THE Sufi master is the representative of the esoteric function of the Prophet of Islam and by the same token the theophany of Divine Mercy which lends itself to those willing to turn to it. The *sharī'a*, the Divine Law, is meant for all Muslims and, in fact from the Islamic view, for all men if its universal meaning is considered. But the *tariqa*, or spiritual Path, is only for those who seek God here and now and who search after that immutable Truth which although present here and now is also the eternal source of all revelation. The *tariqa* is thus a means whereby man can return to the origin of the Islamic revelation itself and become in a spiritual sense both a companion and a successor of the Prophet and the saints.

The role of the spiritual master, the *shaikh*, *murshid*, or *pîr*, is to make this spiritual rebirth and transformation possible. Being himself connected through the chain of initiation (*silsila*) to the Prophet and the function of initiation (*walâya*)¹ inherent in the prophetic mission itself, the Sufi master is able to deliver man from the narrow confines of the material world to the illimitable luminous space of the spiritual life. Through him, acting as the representative of the Prophet, spiritual death and rebirth take place by virtue of the *baraka* present in him.

Fallen man grows old, decays and dies, whereas the regenerated spiritual man is always inwardly in the prime of youth. Having drunk from the fountain of eternal life and having gained access to the elixir of immortality he lives in the perennial spring of the soul even if his body passes through the winter of life. And that is why he is able to endow the disciple with youth, whatever age he may formally be. To behold the perfect master is to regain the ecstasy and joy of the spring of life and to be separated from the master is to experience the sorrow of old age.

I aged with his affliction, but when Tabrîz
You name, all my youth comes back to me.²

Man may seek the fountain of life by himself. He may seek to discover the principles of spiritual regeneration through his own efforts. But this endeavor is in vain unless the master is present. Without the philosopher's stone no alchemical transformation is possible. Only the power of the *shaikh* can deliver man from himself—from his carnal soul—and enable him to behold the Universe as it really is and to join the sea of Universal Existence.

Without the power imperial of Shamsu'l-Haqq of Tabrîz
One could neither behold the moon nor become the sea.³

Of course there are those who are initiated into the way by Khidr or the "men of the invisible hierarchy" (*rijâl al-ghaib*) such as the Uwaisis, or, in the case of Shi‘ism, by the Hidden Imam who is the spiritual pole (*Qutb*) of the Universe. But all these ways, which are not for men to choose and to seek but for which they must be chosen, nevertheless concern the universal initiatic function of which the Sufi master is the embodiment on earth. Inwardly one with the invisible hierarchy and the Truth (*haqq*) itself, he appears outwardly among men as the sign of the supreme mercy (*rahmat*) of God, as the means whereby man can gain access to the spiritual world and be admitted to the company of prophets and saints. He is the door through which one must pass in order to enter "the garden of the Beloved" while at the same time he is the guide to the inner court of this garden.

To become initiated into a Sufi order and to accept the discipleship of a master is to enter into a bond that is permanent, surviving even death. For the disciple the *shaikh* is always mysteriously present especially during the rituals. The *shaikh* never dies for the disciple even if he has left the world. His spiritual guidance (*irshâd*) and assistance continue after death. The spiritual master, whom Rûmi calls the heavenly rider, comes and goes, but the dust of his gallop remains. His effect upon his disciples is permanent and the seed he has sown in their hearts continues to be nurtured and cared for, even after the temple of the body has fallen into dust. Under his care even from this ruin of earth, that seed can grow into a tree which stretches to heaven and extends from the Eastern to the Western horizons.⁴

Slave, be aware
 The lord of all the East⁵ is here;
 The glittering storm-cloud of eternity
 Reveals his lightning-flash to thee.
 Whate'er thou sayst
 Is but as inference has guessed;
 He speaks upon the eye's experience,
 And therein lies the difference.
 The heavenly rider passed;
 The dust rose in the air;
 He sped; but the dust he cast
 Yet hangeth there.
 Straight forward thy vision be,
 And gaze not left or right,
 His dust is here, and he
 In the Infinite.⁶

Likewise the assembly (*majlis*) of the Sufi master is a terrestrial image of the heavenly assembly of the saints. The disciple (*faqîr*) who gains the right of entry into this assembly, by virtue of having been initiated by the master, also gains for himself a place in the assembly of paradise provided he remains faithful to the master and his instructions. Once he fulfils the conditions of discipleship and reaches perfection in the assembly, his station becomes of permanent importance and gains a significance beyond the life of this world and the grave. The master leaves a permanent mark upon the disciple by virtue of which the disciple who has reached perfection again joins the assembly of his master in the other world. By the perfection gained in the *majlis* of the Sufis, the *faqîr* gains access to the royal assembly of heaven and constructs for himself an exalted abode in the after life.

And, O friend, if you reach perfection in our assembly (*majlis*)
Your seat will be the throne, you will gain your desire in all things.
But if you stay many years more in this earth,
You will pass from place to place, you will be as the dice in backgammon.
If Shamsi Tabríz draws you to his side,
When you escape from captivity you will return to that orb.⁷

Not only is the influence of the Shaikh permanent but his light is everywhere. Though distinct as a spiritual personality, he is inwardly identified with the light that shines upon the land and sea and illuminates all things by the disciple who is closely attached to him.

From Tabríz-ward shone the Sun of Truth, and I said to him:
"Thy light is at once joined with all things and apart from all".⁸

It is this light that shines upon the heart of the disciple and converts it from something corruptible and perishable to an incorruptible and eternal substance. It is the spiritual influence of the Shaikh that transforms the transient, passing into the abiding and everlasting.

The sun of the face of Shamsi Din, glory of the horizons
Never shone upon aught perishable but he made it eternal.⁹

Not everyone who claims to be a Sufi master possesses all the qualifications that make for the perfect master. Not only must the disciple seek a master, but he must also be sure that the *shaikh* or *pîr* to whom he is surrendering himself is a seasoned guide who can lead him through the dangerous precipices of the way to the final goal of realization. Otherwise there is a danger of deviation and the corruption of what is most precious in man. With an incompetent guide, it is best not to climb mountains but to remain on flat ground where the danger of a fall would be much less fatal.

The *shaikh* or Sufi master must have a regular connection with the chain of initiation and a realization of the truths of the Path. Moreover, he must be chosen from on high to fulfill the function of guiding others. Even among those who have advanced on the Way, not everyone is qualified to become a master. The master is chosen by the hand of Divine Mercy to guide men. He cannot claim to fulfill this function simply through his own will. If he is to be an effective master he must know the details and intricacies of the Path and also the soul and psychic substance of the disciple whom he is to guide. Not only is the presence of a perfect *shaikh* necessary but he must also be a master who has the qualifications for guiding a particular disciple. Not every *shaikh* is a master for every disciple. The disciple must seek and find the master who conquers his soul and dominates him as an eagle or falcon pounces upon a sparrow in the air.

O Splendor of the Truth, Husâmu'ddîn,¹⁰ take one or two sheets of paper and add (them to the poem) in description of the Pîr.

Although thy slender body hath no strength, yet without the sun (of thy spirit) we have no light.

Although thou hast become the lighted wick and the glass (lamp), yet thou art the heart's leader (the Spiritual Guide): thou art the end of the thread (which serves as a clue).

Inasmuch as the end of the thread is in thy hand and will, the beads (of spiritual knowledge) on the heart's necklace are (derived) from thy bounty. Write down what appertains to the Pîr (Guide) who knows the Way: choose the Pîr and regard him as the essence of the Way.

The Pîr is (like) summer, and (other) people are (like) the autumn month; (other) people are like night, and the Pîr is the moon.

I have bestowed on (my) young Fortune (Husâmu'ddîn) the name of Pîr (old), because he is

(made) old by the Truth, not (made) old by Time. So old is he that he hath no beginning: there is no rival to such a unique Pearl. Verily, old wine grows more potent; verily, old gold is more highly prized. Choose a Pîr, for without a Pîr this journey is exceeding full of woe and affright and danger.

Without an escort you are bewildered (even) on a road you have traveled many times (before):

Do not, then, travel alone on a Way that you have not seen at all, do not turn your head away from the Guide.¹¹

To accept initiatic guidance from one who is not a perfect master is most dangerous for it may completely spoil the possibility of spiritual realization and even open the soul to demonic influences. The potentiality of growth is there within men, but if it is not trained correctly, it will become spoiled and like a spoilt seed never be able to grow into a tree.

"As for the master (*murâd*), in the sense of one who is initiated and followed, he is one whose initiatic power (*walâya*) in influencing others has reached the degree of perfecting those who are imperfect and who has seen [initiatically] the different kinds of capabilities and ways of guiding and training disciples. Such a person is either a traveler attracted by Divine Grace (*sâlik-i majdhûb*) who has first traversed all the deserts and precipices of the qualities of the carnal soul through traveling upon the Path (*sulûk*), and then with the help of Divine attraction has returned from the stations of the heart and ascensions of the spirit, and has reached the world of vision and certainty and joined the state of contemplation and examination. Or he is one attracted by Divine Grace who travels on the Path (*majdhûb-i sâlik*), who first through the help of Divine attraction has traversed the extent of the stations and has reached the world of vision and unveiling of the Divine realities and then has crossed again the stations and stages of the Path through traveling (*sulûk*) and has rediscovered the truth of contemplation in the form of knowledge.

"The degree of being a spiritual guide, worthy of imitation, is certain in the case of these two types of men. As for the destitute traveler (*sâlik*) who has not as yet left the narrow strait of spiritual struggle and endeavor to reach the space of spiritual vision or the destitute person attracted by Divine Grace (*majdhûb*) who has not as yet become aware of the intricacies of traveling upon the Path or of the realities of the stations and stages, and of the pitfalls and dangerous passages of the Way, neither has as yet the right to the station and rank of spiritual master (*shaikhûkhat*). The initiatic power of influencing the spiritual capabilities of the adept and training the disciples according to the laws of the Path (*tarîqa*) has not been entrusted to them. Whatever conquest they make in the souls of men in this sense is more harmful than beneficial.

"The existence of the disciple and the potentiality of spiritual perfection in him is like an egg in which the potentiality of becoming a bird is present. If it becomes capable of receiving the spiritual power, the influence of the spiritual will (*himmat*) and the protection of a mature bird in whom the power of procreation and causing the egg to hatch has become predominant with ebullition, and if for a period the influences of the spiritual life and the characteristics of the perfection of being a bird affect him, then finally the form of egg is taken away from him. He will be dressed in the form of a bird and made to reach the perfection of his capabilities. And if the egg is placed under a chicken who does not possess the power of flight or has not as yet reached the degree of maturity and power to make the egg hatch and this goes on for some time, the potentiality of becoming a bird is destroyed in it and then there will be no way of restoring it.

"Likewise, if the sincere disciple places himself in complete obedience and submission under the control of a perfect master who has attained the degree of perfection and in whom traveling

upon the Path, flight, spiritual march and attraction to the Divine Grace are combined, from the egg of his existence the bird of the truth ‘Verily God created Adam in His image’ will come forth, a bird which will then fly in the space of spiritual identity and reach the degree of procreation and generation. But if he comes under the influence of a destitute traveler (*sālik*) or one attracted to Divine Grace (*majdhūb*) then the possibility of the perfection of the human state will become spoiled in him. He will not reach the excellence of spiritual men (*rijāl*) or the station of perfection".¹²

The disciple must surrender himself to the perfect *shaikh*, without any reserve. In the hands of the master he must be like a corpse in the hands of the washer of the dead without any movement of its own. The master is the representative of the Prophet and through him of God. To shake his hand is to accept the "Hand of the Divine".

God has declared that his (the Pir's) hand is as His own, since He gave out (the words) *the Hand of God is above their hands*.

The Hand of God causes him (the child) to die and (then) brings him to life. What of life?

He makes him a spirit everlasting.¹³

The role of the Sufi master to whom one must make perfect surrender and his significance in delivering the disciple from bewilderment in the world of multiplicity to contemplation in the world of Unity are well exemplified in the spiritual testament of Shams al-‘urafā’ ("the sun of the gnostics"), one of the leading Sufi masters of the present century in Persia. Shams al-‘urafā’ described his meeting with his master and subsequent transformations that overcame him as follows:

"This humble *faqîr*, Sayyid Husain ibn al-Ridā al-Husainî al-Tihirânî al-Ni’matullâhî, was blessed with divine favor in the year 1303 (A.H.) when I met His gracious Highness, the model of gnostics and the pole of orientation of the travelers upon the Path, the honorable direction of prayers Shaikh 'Abd al-Quddûs Kirmânshâhî. At this time all my attention was directed to the study of the formal (traditional) sciences and I possessed some knowledge of medicine, philosophy, mathematics, geometry, astronomy and astrology, jurisprudence and its principles, grammar, geography and prosody and was occupied with studying and teaching. But I had no knowledge of the problems of Sufism and the laws of spiritual poverty and gnosis and was unaware of the science of the truth and the intricacies of Divine knowledge. My attention was turned only to the problems of the formal sciences and the debates and discussion of textbooks but not to inner purification, embellishment and contemplation. I had made no endeavor on the path of purifying the soul and cleansing the inner being, thinking that the way to know the truth is none other than pursuing the formal sciences.

"Thanks to Divine Grace and the aid of the Pure Imams—upon whom be peace—I met that great man on the above-mentioned date near Imâm-Zâdih Zaid.¹⁴ He did with me what he did. Again within the distance of a week I was blessed with his presence near Imâm-Zâdih Zaid.

"After some conversation I expressed the wish to become initiated. On Thursday night I went to the bath at his side and received the ritual ablutions that he had ordered. After the bath he took my hand in the customary fashion and after performing the formula of repentance he instructed and initiated me to the invocation (*dhikr*) of the heart with the litanies (*awrâd*), the particular initiating acts and invocations. I obeyed. After fifteen nights [the minor retreat (*khatwat-i saghîr*)] near the hour of dawn, while in contemplation, I saw all the doors and walls of the dark room in which I was placed participating in the invocation with me.

"I fainted and fell. After sunrise my corporeal father because of the great love he had for me did not stop at any measure in bringing a physician and calling those who attract the *jinn* (psychic forces) or write prayers to cure illness. My corporeal mother also did all possible in the way of administering different medicines, fumigations and nourishments.

"For twenty days I was in such a condition. I could not perform the duties laid down by the *shari'a* nor was I aware of formal customs. I spoke to no one concerning this matter. After this period my condition returned somewhat to normal and I became free from the state of 'attraction' (*jadhba*). I went to the bath and purified myself. I felt the desire to meet that great master and for a few days I wandered as a mad man in the streets and bazaars seeking him. Finally I succeeded in meeting him. I kissed his hand and he expressed his benevolence towards me.

"To summarize: for two years I traveled upon the spiritual Path under his care and following his instructions. I turned away completely from the formal sciences and endeavored to understand questions of gnosis and march upon the Path of certainty. Whatever he ordered I obeyed without saying yes or no. If some of the things I heard or saw appeared on the surface to be opposed to the *shari'a*, I considered it a defect of my own ears and eyes and did not fail in any way to serve and obey him. In service, conversation, solitude and retreat I obeyed as completely as I could. I also obeyed all that he had ordered as necessary in the six kinds of invocation: the manifested (*jalî*), the hidden (*khafî*), the informal (*hamâ'ili*), the obscure (*khumûlî*), that connected with the circle (*halqa*) and with the gathering (*ijtimâ*). I was also made to realize the four houses of death....

"Thanks be to God, through his spiritual will and the assistance of the saints I realized all the seven states of the heart and fulfilled in the way of actions and litanies whatever was required for each station. I performed the minor, middle and major 'forty days' (*arba'inât*) [of spiritual retreat]. In the year 1309 (A.H.) I accompanied him to the city of faith, Qum, and there performed two consecutive major 'forty days'. His Highness joined the Divine Mercy (died) there and I became very ill without my intimate friend and comforter. I passed days and nights in hardship at the corner of the mosque of Imâm Hasan until my poor mother discovered my condition and sent someone to Qum who for a while treated me.

"After some improvement I returned to Tehran with that friend. Thank God through the spiritual will of that great gnostic I came to know of the details of spiritual poverty, gnosis, the subtleties of realized knowledge and certainty, and reached the station of annihilation in God (*fanâ'*) and subsistence in Him. (*baqâ'*). I traveled the seven stations of the heart each with its special characteristics. With his esoteric aid and assistance from the intermediate world (*barzakh*) whatever order I received of commands or prohibitions, cleanliness, worship, asceticism, spiritual retreat, or self-purification I performed fully and did not fall short of serving God's creatures as far as I could".¹⁵

In speaking of the Sufi master in the Persian context one must also remember the role of the Twelfth Imâm, who is the Hidden Imâm, in both Shi'ism and Sufism as it exists in the Shi'ite world. In as much the Imâm, although in concealment, is alive and is the spiritual axis of the world, he is the pole (*Qutb*) with whom all Sufi masters are inwardly connected. He is to Shi'ism what the supreme pole is to Sufism in its Sunni context. In Shi'ism the Imams, especially 'Ali, the first, and the Mahdî, the last, are the spiritual guides *par excellence*. The Hidden Imam, representing the whole chain of Imams, is the pole that attracts the hearts of the believers and it is to him that men turn for guidance.

Moreover, the Imâm also exists within the hearts of men. He is the inner guide who can lead man on his journey beyond the cosmos and also into the inner dimensions of his own being. If only one could reach this inner pole. That is why certain Shi'ite gnostics and Sufis have instructed the disciple to seek the "*imâm* of his being". The possessor of the power of *walâya* or initiation, by virtue of which the Imâm in fact becomes the Imâm, is the esoteric interpreter of things, of religion and of nature. And it is, in the Shi'ite view, his inward connection with the Sufi masters that enables them to gain the power of initiating and guiding men so that they can in fact reach the inner pole of their being.

It can therefore be said that despite a difference of view in Shiite and Sunni Islam as to the identity of the *Qutb*, which Sunnism does not identify distinctly but Shi'ism considers to be the Hidden Imâm or the function of the Imâm as such, both agree to the presence of this universal initiatic function (*walâya*) which exists within Islam as within every integral tradition. The Sufi masters are those unique individuals who through their connection with this golden chain of initiation are called upon by God to keep the presence of the spiritual Way alive on this earth and to guide upon this royal Path those who possess the necessary qualifications. They are thus the princes of the spiritual world. In their hands the desert blooms into a garden, base metal is turned into gold and the chaotic state of the soul is crystallized into a pattern of beauty reflecting the perfume of Unity (*tauhîd*).

Make a journey out of self into self, O master,
For by such a journey earth becomes a quarry of gold.
From sourness and bitterness advance to sweetness,
Even as from briny soil a thousand sorts of fruits spring up.
From the sun, the pride of Tabriz, behold these miracles,
For every tree gains beauty by the light of the sun.¹⁶

(Original editorial inclusions that followed the essay:)

'What is a reasonable man?'—One who is controlled in joy and sorrow, him I call a reasonable man.—'How would you define prayer?'—St. Augustine says, prayer is the soul's detachment from things and attachment to God.—'Tell me, Sir, can we be rid of things at once without any trouble?'—No, it is always accompanied with pain: that indicates the pull of something higher. If it comes without pain it is no matter for rejoicing. True, St. Paul lost things all at once, but afterwards he had to conquer them in detail. Conquests made by suffering are lasting.

Meister Eckhart.

¹ The term *walî* in the context of Sufism means "saint". The Arabic root besides meaning "friend" also possesses the meaning of dominion or power. From this root the terms *wilâya* and *walâya* are formed, the first meaning sanctity and the second the initiatic power or function as such. In Shi'ism especially, the distinction between "the cycle of prophecy" (*dâ'irat al-nubuwwa*) and "the cycle of initiation" (*dâ'irat al-walâya*) is emphasized.

² R. A. Nicholson, *Selected Poems from the Dīvāni Shamsi Tabrīz*, Cambridge, 1952, p. 25. Shams-i Tabrīzī was the spiritual master of the greatest Sufi poet of the Persian language, Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, and also for him the perfect theophany of the Divine Names and Qualities, the total exemplar of the Universal Man. The *Dīvān* especially, contains some of the most beautiful and profound verses in Persian on the function of the spiritual master and the relation between master and disciple. The name of Shams-i Tabrīzī (Shams al-Dīn meaning the "sun of religion") is itself highly symbolic and Rumi often uses the symbolism of the name in verses which seem to refer to both the master and the Divine Truth Itself alluding again and again to the inner union of the master with God.

³ Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

⁴ It must, of course, be remembered that initiation into Sufism by a master does not in itself guarantee realization. The disciple must be firm in his devotion to the master and in performing his religious and initiatic duties. He must love God more than the world and be attached to Him not only through a theoretical comprehension of Sufi metaphysics but also by a total "ontological" attachment. There must also be present Divine succor and aid (*taufīq*) without which nothing is possible. The gardener sows many seeds in the ground: not all of them grow to be plants that bear fruit.

⁵ Since the name Shams al-Dīn means the "sun of religion" and the sun rises in the east, Rūmī often employs the universal symbolism of East and West as domains of light and darkness and refers to his master as the "lord of the East" again implying his union with the source of all light.

⁶ A. J. Arberry, *The Ruba'iyāt of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī*, London, 1949, p. 19.

⁷ Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁸ Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹⁰ When writing the *Mathnawī*, Rūmī's spiritual pole of attraction was Husām al-Dīn, the figure who is so often cited in the *Mathnawī*.

¹¹ Rūmī, *Mathnawī*, trans. R. A. Nicholson, vol. II, London, 1926, pp. 160-161.

¹² 'Izz al-Dīn Kāshānī, *Misbāh al-hidāya*, ed. J. Homā'i, Tehran, 1323 (A. H. Solar), pp. 108-109 (translated from the Persian by S. H. Nasr).

¹³ *Mathnawī*, vol. II, p. 162.

¹⁴ A tomb of a saint near Tehran.

¹⁵ 'Abd al-Hujjat Balāghī, *Maqālāt al-hunafā fī maqāmāt Shams al-'urafa'*, Tehran, 1327 (A. H. Solar), pp. 232-34 (translated from the Persian by S. H. Nasr).

¹⁶ Nicholson, *op. cit.*, p. 111.