

**What is Sufism ?**  
**Pir Zia Inayat Khan**  
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I thought it might be helpful to begin by saying something about the meaning of the term Sufism. Because Sufism, it should be remembered first of all, is a neologism—a newly coined word. And I must say it’s not only a neologism but also a misnomer, a badly coined word, and that is because it contains an “ism” and the “ism” subverts the essential meaning of the word because an “ism” always suggests a closed community, an ideology, a doctrine—and Sufism, in essence, is none of those things. So if we want to truly know what Sufism is it would be helpful to go back to the original word in Arabic which is *tasawwuf*. It’s not quite as easy to pronounce but it contains a more accurate meaning because it is a verbal noun, and so it refers to a process of becoming. It’s not static, but dynamic. *Tasawwuf* literally means the process of becoming a Sufi. So from the outset one understands that it is not a club to which you belong or do not belong, it is a transformative experience.

But then the question is: What is a Sufi? What is the end result of that process? Since the earliest days when this word came into currency – *tasawwuf* and Sufi – the Sufis have given their answers to the question, what is a Sufi? Each of those answers differs. Each of those answers is a facet of the single reality that is the meaning of being a Sufi. Those definitions are like Arabic koans that help to orient us in a process toward which we can only distantly perceive its goal. Here are some of the definitions and I will read them in translation.

The first is from a Sufi named Abu’l-Hasan Bushanji:

“Sufism today is a name without a reality that was once a reality without a name.” That was said back in the eighth or ninth century.

And this from Ibn al-Jalla:

“Sufism is an essence, a truth. There is no form, no ritual, no custom in it. It is pure essence.”

These two sayings go together. Sufism was a reality that has now become a form, has now become a name that is no longer a reality. True Sufism is always a reality that eludes form. It can never be fully embodied in form and takes on all manner of forms, innumerable forms for its expression and manifestation. And yet its whole essence remains secret, hidden, beyond form. The Sufis have always recognized the process whereby a hidden

secret is institutionalized, commodified and known to the world as a form while the Sufis themselves, in secret, concealed its essence and carried on. This has happened over the generations. Time after time a transmission has been passed down from person to person from heart to heart without intermediary, always from heart to heart.

Of course, it's not to say that Sufis haven't written books. The very same Sufis who said that it could never be put into words went on to write multi-volume encyclopedias. But at the end of the day, they knew that words fail.

Here is the next definition, from Abu'l-Hasan al-Nuri, a great early Sufi:

“Sufism is not rituals and forms and is not bodies of knowledge, not doctrines, not ideas, not theories. But it is impeccable manner, the manner of the lover in the presence of the Beloved.”

That is the very essence of the law. The religious law exists to keep us in check when we are unaware of the presence of the Beloved. When one is in the awesome intimacy of the Beloved, one's behavior rises to a degree of perfection that is otherwise unattainable. Probably you have all noticed in your own life that you behave according to different standards depending on who you are with. And the one that you most idealize, the one who is most beloved, in the presence of that one, you are on your best behavior. Sufism, then, is living life in that constant presence.

There was a Sufi murshid (teacher) once in India who said to his students, “Unfortunately the time has come that we have to change our tactics. Until now we've just been receiving alms from whomever will spontaneously give, but things have become very difficult and now I will have to ask you to take something surreptitiously. Go out and steal something. The one provision is that you can't do it when anyone is looking.”

People came back with all kinds of things: someone had a chicken and someone else brought a purse, and only one of the students came back with empty hands. And the murshid said, “I gave you very clear orders to steal something and you have brought back nothing!”

The student said, “I had to obey your caveat not to do it when anyone was looking, and God was looking everywhere.”

This, then, relates to the next definition which is again from that very great early Sufi, Abu'l-Hasan al-Nuri.

“The Sufi is one who possesses nothing and is possessed by nothing.”

You will find in the East, fakirs who interpret this very literally. They possess nothing. They are wandering mendicants who own nothing. And there are others who live in palaces in great opulence but are completely detached from the wealth, ready to release it at any moment. They are playing a role in the world. That is the essence of what is meant by not possessing and not being possessed. Possessing means grasping, being addicted, being unable to part from something. The Sufi is addicted, being unable to part with only one thing and that is the One Being who is ever-present and can never be lost or stolen. So one finds that the less one possesses, psychically possesses, the less one is possessed. Because all the things of life, as one collects them, just weight one down. Of course, there will come a time, whether in this life or in the next when everything, item by item, will have to be released. It can be voluntary or involuntary.

Here is another definition of Sufism:

“The Sufi is the possessor of breaths.”

The previous definition said the Sufi does not possess anything. This is an exception to the rule. “The Sufi is the possessor of breaths.” “The one who breathes well” is another translation or “The one who is awake to the breath.” You know it is an idea in the East that each person is born on earth with a certain limited number of breaths. Some yogis try to extend their breath, slow down the breath, so they will live much longer. Well, the same principle applies here, but it is not extending the breath in time, but extending the breath beyond time, making each instant, in the awakened breath, eternal. It is through the breath that we attain presence and through the neglect of the breath that we are absent. My grandfather was told by his murshid that in this path of Sufism there is only one sin and one virtue. The sin is the breath that escapes in forgetfulness and the virtue is the breath that is breathed in awareness of the unity of being. It is as simple as that. Just one lesson in Sufism: each breath to be breathed in remembrance of the One Being. It is something very simple, but it is a lifetime study.

And now another definition from Abu Muhammad Murta'ish:

“The Sufi is the one whose thought keeps pace with his footstep. The one who is where she stands. The one who is present here with feet firmly planted on the earth. The one in whom body and soul are united in presence, in awareness.”

To illustrate this I will share a story, this time from my own life. As a child I was living in India and studying breath and movement, the subject of the above definitions. I was studying with a teacher of Tai Chi from Japan. He was teaching me the movements of a particular form. Everyday we would work together. After some months like this, he told me, “You have attained a certain proficiency in this form and it is now time that we invite our friends and have a demonstration of this form.”

We did this on the roof of the Tibetan National Library in Dharamsala, a very auspicious place to do Tai Chi, and gathered some good friends. He was doing the movement and I was doing the movement. As we were doing so, I suddenly felt a little itch on my neck right at the jugular vein. I very gently deviated from the movements, and brought the fingers down over my neck and then brought them forward. And then I could see there was a black scorpion with its stinger poised to strike. At that moment the consciousness of breath, the consciousness of movement – all that was lost. I dropped the scorpion. But I wondered how did the scorpion get from the ground to my neck? It must have crawled all the way up.

I just thank meditation for saving my life. I can truly say from that experience that meditation saved my life, that the awareness of breath, the awareness of the soul in the body, something that is inculcated in Tai Chi allowed me to be in a state in which the scorpion felt no animosity. So that has been a profound lesson that has lived with me ever since. And I think it applies to many situations, not only deadly insects, but all kinds of adversity in the world. The greatest protection that is possible is the serenity of the awakened breath.

Here is another definition—a very wonderful and provocative saying:

“He is a Sufi whose religion is God.”

Not Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, any “ism”. The religion itself is just God. God is the religion. A religion is an accommodation in which one can more and more orient to the divine presence as it transpires in the horizon and in oneself. The attainment of a state of mystical realization is one in which one’s religious obligation is directed to that reality. So one follows a religion whose forms are every form. Every revealed tradition is an element of this universal religion which is the divine religion that encompasses all of the human traditions that are reflecting its one light.

This is the universality of Sufism and the universality of every mystical tradition in its essence. A reality, not a ritual, not a form. The essence is always the reality behind the form. It is always illuminating to recall the words of Shaykh al-Akbar Ibn al-‘Arabi who says, “Beware confining yourself to a particular conception and denying all else, for much good would elude you. Indeed the knowledge of reality would elude you. Be in yourself a substance for all forms, for God is too vast and tremendous to be restricted to one form of belief rather

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than another.” That is a direct quote from Shaykh al-Akbar Ibn al-‘Arabi from his *Fusus al-Hikam* and one that speaks in a very relevant and timely way in our time when humanity is struggling to find a common spiritual language that transcends the boundaries of difference. Not merely a globalized market but a globalized spirit.

Here is another definition. Al-Shibli was a great mad friend of al-Hallaj. When al-Hallaj was sentenced to death and people were throwing stones at him, al-Shibli threw a rose. He used to frequent the asylums of his day. People weren’t sure if he was totally mad or totally sane. He said:

“A Sufi does not see in the two worlds, in this world and the hereafter, anything with God except God. Nothing in addition to God.”

In every situation, in every place, at every time, in every relationship, the Sufi keeps coming back to the One and sees the innumerable masks as veils on the face of a single infinite personality, divine being. Not for a single moment does the Sufi imagine that anything could be additional, recognizing immediately, intuitively, that everything is essentially singular in its essence. The Sufi recognizes that this whole manifestation is one phantasmagoria that is the refraction and reflection of a single Light.

And now finally, these words of Shaykh Abu Yazid Bistami:

“The Sufis are like infants in the bosom of God.”

To be a Sufi is to be in that state of reliance, assurance, loving resonance, non-individuated consciousness, feeling oneself enclosed in a loving embrace that is eternal and infinite and irrevocable, knowing the essence of reality to be not ambivalent but in truth essentially compassionate, accepting, forgiving, nurturing. Infinite mercy. Eternal compassion. These are no longer theories or wishful thinking but one’s essential experience, incontrovertibly true because one resides in the embrace of the Divine Love. And this is the true meaning of the title of the conference this weekend: “The Power of Love.”

God bless you.