

THE SUFIS

Idries Shah

With an Introduction by Robert Graves



The definitive work on a mystical teaching and a way of life that have had enormous impact on both the East and the West.

THE SUFIS

Idries Shah

Introduction by Robert Graves

The definitive work on Sufism—a mystical teaching and a way of life that has had an enormous, though largely unrecognized, impact on both the East and West for four thousand years. Its followers—Sufis—believe that it is not *a* religion, but that it *is* religion. The Sufis believe in *conscious* evolution which means that, by an effort of will, man can originate new faculties—the faculties of mental telepathy and prophecy are examples—and thus they believe in the limitless perfectability of man. To its followers, Sufism is the secret tradition behind all religious and philosophical systems.

Robert Graves, in his introduction, says, “. . . the natural Sufi may be as common in the West as in the East, and may come dressed as a general, a merchant, a lawyer, a schoolmaster, a housewife, anything. To be ‘in the

(Continued on back flap)

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Ch: Abdul Aziz

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THE SITUATION

6/1/65

Humanity is asleep, concerned only with what is useless, living in a wrong world. Believing that one can excel this is only habit and usage, not religion. This "religion" is inept. . . .

Do not prattle before the People of the Path, rather consume yourself. You have an inverted knowledge and religion if you are upside down in relation to Reality.

Man is wrapping his net around himself. A lion (the man of the Way) bursts his cage asunder.

(The Sufi master Sanai of Afghanistan, teacher of Rumi, in *The Walled Garden of Truth*, written in 1131 A.D.)

صلى الله عليه وسلم

INTRODUCTION

7/1/85

The Sufis are an ancient spiritual freemasonry whose origins have never been traced or dated; nor do they themselves take much interest in such researches, being content to point out the occurrence of their own way of thought in different regions and periods. Though commonly mistaken for a Moslem sect, the Sufis are at home in all religions: just as the "Free and Accepted Masons" lay before them in their Lodge whatever sacred book—whether Bible, Koran, or Torah—is accepted by the temporal State. If they call Islam the "shell" of Sufism, this is because they believe Sufism to be the secret teaching within all religions. Yet according to Ali el-Hujwiri, an early authoritative Sufi writer, the Prophet Mohammed himself said: "He who hears the voice of the Sufi people and does not say *aamin* [Amen] is recorded in God's presence as one of the heedless." Numerous other traditions link him with the Sufis, and it was in Sufi style that he ordered his followers to respect all People of a Book, meaning those who respected their own sacred scriptures—a term later taken to include Zoroastrians.

Nor are the Sufis a sect, being bound by no religious dogma however tenuous and using no regular place of worship. They have no sacred city, no monastic organization, no religious instruments. They even dislike being given any inclusive name which might force them into doctrinal conformity. "Sufi" is no more than a nickname, like "Quaker," which they accept good-humoredly. "We friends" or "people like us" is how they refer to themselves, and they recognize one another by certain natural gifts, habits, qualities of thought. Sufi schools have indeed gathered around particular teachers, but there is no graduation and they exist only for the convenience of those who work to perfect their studies by close association with fellow Sufis. The characteristic Sufic signature is found in widely dispersed literature from at least the second millennium B.C., and although their most obvious impact on civilization was made between the

How did he get this number?

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eighth and eighteenth centuries A.D., Sufis are still active as ever. They number some fifty million. What makes them so difficult to discuss is that their mutual recognition cannot be explained in ordinary moral or psychological terms—whoever understands it is himself a Sufi. Though awareness of this secret quality or instinct can be sharpened by close contact with Sufis of experience, there are no hierarchical degrees among them, only a general undisputed recognition of greater or lesser capacity.

Sufism has gained an Oriental flavor from having been so long protected by Islam, but the natural Sufi may be as common in the West as in the East, and may come dressed as a general, a peasant, a merchant, a lawyer, a schoolmaster, a housewife, anything. To be "in the world, but not of it," free from ambition, greed, intellectual pride, blind obedience to custom, or awe of persons higher in rank—that is the Sufi's ideal.

Sufis respect the rituals of religion insofar as these further social harmony, but broaden religion's doctrinal basis wherever possible and define its myths in a higher sense—for instance, explaining angels as representations of man's higher faculties. The individual devotee is offered a "secret garden" for the growth of his understanding, but never required to become a monk, nun or hermit, like the more conventional mystics; and he thereafter claims to be enlightened by actual experience—"he who tastes, knows"—not by philosophic argument. The earliest known theory of conscious evolution is of Sufi origin but, though much quoted by Darwinians in the great nineteenth-century controversy, it applies to the individual rather than to the race. The child's slow progress into manhood or womanhood figures as only a stage in his development of more spectacular powers for which the dynamic force is love, not either asceticism or the intellect.

Enlightenment comes with love—love in the poetic sense of perfect devotion to a Muse who, whatever apparent cruelties she may commit or however seemingly irrational her behavior, knows what she is doing. She seldom rewards her poet with any express sign of her favor, but confirms his devotion by its revivifying effect on him. Thus Ibn El-Arabi (1165-1240), a Spanish Arab from Murcia

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whom the Sufis call their Master Poet, wrote in his *Tarjuman el-Ashwaq* (Interpreter of Desires):

If I bow to her as is my duty
 And if she never returns my salutation
 Have I just cause for complaint?
 Lovely woman feel no obligation. ✓

This love theme was later used in an ecstatic cult of the Virgin Mary, who until the Crusades had occupied an unimportant position in the Christian religion. Her greatest veneration today is precisely in those parts of Europe that fell strongly under Sufic influence.

Ibn El-Arabi says of himself:

I follow the religion of Love.
 Now I am sometimes called
 A Shepherd of gazelles [divine wisdom]
 And now a Christian monk,
 And now a Persian sage.
 My beloved is Three—
 Three yet only one;
 Many things appear as three,
 Which are no more than one.
 Give her no name,
 As if to limit one
 At sight of whom
 All limitation is confounded.

The poets were the chief disseminators of Sufi thought, earned the same reverence as did the *ollamhs*, or master poets, of early medieval Ireland, and used a similar secret language of metaphorical reference and verbal cipher. Nizami the Persian Sufi writes: "Under the poet's tongue lies the key of the treasury." This language was a protection both against the vulgarizing or institutionalizing of a habit of thought only proper to those that understand it, and against accusations of heresy or civil disobedience. Ibn El-Arabi, summoned before an Islamic inquisition at Aleppo to defend himself against charges of nonconformity, pleaded that his poems were metaphorical, the basic message being God's perfection of man through

divine love. He had, for precedent, the incorporation in the Jewish Scriptures of the erotic Song of Solomon, which was officially interpreted by the Pharisee sages as a metaphor of God's love for Israel; and by the Catholic authorities as a metaphor of God's love for his Church.

In its most advanced form the secret language uses Semitic consonantal roots to conceal and reveal meanings; and Western scholars seem unaware that even the popular *Thousand and One Nights* is Sufic in content, and that its Arabic title *Alf layla wa layla* is a code phrase indicating its main content and intention: "Mother of Records." Yet what seems at first sign Oriental occultism is an ancient and familiar Western habit of thought. Most English and French schoolchildren begin history lessons with a picture of their Druidic ancestors lopping mistletoe from a sacred oak. Although the Druids are credited by Caesar with ancestral mysteries and a secret language, the lopping seems so simple a ceremony, mistletoe being still used in Christmas decorations, that few readers pause to consider what it means. The current view that the Druids were virtually emasculating the oak makes no sense.

Now, all other sacred trees, plants and herbs have peculiar properties. The alder's timber is waterproof and its leaves yield a royal red dye; birch is the host of the hallucigenetic fly-cap mushroom; oak and ash attract lightning for a holy fire; the mandrake root is antispasmodic. The foxglove yields digitalis which accelerates the beat of the heart; poppies are opiates; ivy has toxic leaves and its flowers provide bees with the last honey of the year. But the berries of the mistletoe, widely known in folklore as an "allheal," have no medicinal properties, though greedily eaten by wood pigeons and other nonmigratory birds in winter. The leaves are equally valueless; and the timber, though tough, can be put to few uses. Why then was the mistletoe singled out as the most sacred and curative of plants? The only answer can be that the Druids used it as an emblem of their own peculiar way of thought. Here is a tree that is no tree, but fastens itself alike on oak, apple, poplar, beech, thorn, even pine, grows green, nourishing itself on the topmost branches when the rest of the forest seems asleep, and the fruit of which is credited with curing all spiritual disorders. Lopped sprigs of it are tied to the

lintel of a door and invite sudden and surprising kisses. The symbolism is exact, if we can equate Druidic with Sufic thought, which is not planted like a tree, as religions are planted, but self-engrafted on a tree already in existence; it keeps green though the tree itself is asleep, in the sense that religions go dead by formalism; and the main motive power of its growth is love, not ordinary animal passion or domestic affection but a sudden surprising recognition of love so rare and high that the heart seems to sprout wings. Strangely enough, the Burning Bush from which God appeared to Moses in the desert is now thought by Biblical scholars to have been an *acacia* glorified by the red leaves of a *locanthus*, the Eastern equivalent of mistletoe.¹

The Irish Muse-goddess Bridget was threefold like the Muse celebrated by Ibn El-Arabi; and not threefold merely in the sense of being at once maiden, nymph and crone, but in that of presiding over three spiritual realms—poetry, healing and handicraft. It need not greatly concern us whether this concept is native to Ireland, or whether it came from the East along with the complicated arabesques of medieval Irish illumination art and the curiously Persian or Arabian forms of ninth-century Irish poems. Certainly a well-known ninth-century Celtic cross is distinguished by bearing the Arabic formula *Bismillah er-Rahman, er-Rahim* (In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful) as proof that Sufism is consistent with both religions.

It should perhaps matter more that all the noblest Islamic art and architecture is Sufic, and that healing, especially of psychosomatic disorders, is every day practiced by Sufis today as a natural love duty, though not until they have studied for at least twelve years. The *ollamhs* were also healers and studied twelve years in their woodland schools. The Sufi physician must not accept any payment more valuable than a handful of barley, nor impose his own will on the patient, as most modern psychiatrists do; but having put him into deep hypnosis he must make him diagnose his own disorder and pre-

¹ The great Sufi poet Rumi wrote:

In Winter the bare boughs that seem to sleep
Work covertly, preparing for their Spring.

Though he did not mention the mistletoe, or any other *locanthus*, here is the visible emblem of the secret process of thought to which his lines refer.

scribe the cure. The physician then gives advice on how to prevent a recurrence of the symptoms, though the demand for a cure must come directly from the patient, not from his family or well-wishers.²

After their conquest by the Saracens beginning in the eighth century A.D., Spain and Sicily became centers of Moslem civilization renowned for religious austerity. The northern scholars who flocked there to buy Arabic works for translation into Latin did not however demand orthodox Islamic doctrine but only Sufi literature and occasional scientific treatises. The songs of the troubadours—the word is unconnected with *trobar*, “to find,” but represents the Arabic root TRB, meaning “lutanist”—are now authoritatively established as of Saracen origin. Yet Professor Guillaume points out in *The Legacy of Islam* that poetry, romances, music and dance, all Sufi specialties, were no more welcomed by the orthodox authorities of Islam than by Christian bishops. Arabic, in fact, although a carrier both for the Moslem religion and for Sufi thought, remained independent of either.

In 1229, the island of Majorca, where I have lived since 1929, was captured by King James of Aragon from the Saracens, who had held it for five centuries. He thereupon chose as his emblem a bat, which still appears above the arms of Palma, our capital. This bat emblem had long puzzled me, and the local tradition that it stood for “vigilance” did not seem a sufficient explanation, because the bat, in Christian usage, is an ill-omened creature associated with witchcraft. But I remembered that James I stormed Palma with the help of the Knights Templars and of two or three dissident Moorish noblemen living elsewhere in the island; that the Knights Templars had educated James in *le bon saber*, or wisdom; and that during the Crusades, the Knights Templars were accused of collaboration with Saracen Sufis. It therefore occurred to me that “bat” might have another meaning in Arabic, and be a signal to James’s local Moorish allies, presumably Sufis, of his schooling in their own wisdom.

I wrote to Idries Shah Sayed, who replied:

² A clinical account of one aspect of this practice is contained in Dr. Jafar Hallaji’s “Hypnotherapeutic Techniques in a Central Asian Community,” *International Journal of Clinical and Experimental Hypnosis*, October, 1962, pp. 271 et seq.

In the center stands a palm tree, containing the nine elements of the "magic square of fifteen," a complicated diagram attributed to Geber (Jabir) the Sufi and revered alike by the Latin alchemists and the Chinese Taoists. The palm tree (NaKHL) is chosen because the triconsonantal root NKHL also means "a fine essence descending almost impalpably," such as the divine element *baraka* or "blessedness." Words from the same root include sifted flour and a gentle drizzle of rain. Since the palm is a holy tree associated with birth among the Arabs, its appearance on a coronation robe means "Source of Blessedness." Moreover, the word for "palm tree" is *tariqat*, which is the Sufi technical term for "Being on the Path"—that is to say, Sufism. On either side of the palm a tiger is shown dragging down a camel. NMR is the Arabic root for "tiger," and JML for "camel." Thus the NMR overcomes the JML. But NMR also stands for "woolen garment" and for "unimpaired honor;" and since "Sufi" can mean "clad in wool," and since unimpaired honor is, with love, one of the two main pillars of Sufism, "Sufi" can be substituted for "tiger." Thus "The Sufi overcomes JML." JML, too, means not only "camel," but also "elegance." As an indication that both the tiger and the camel are human, they wear similar stripes, but the camel has fewer, meaning that unimpaired honor is not altogether inelegant. Thus: "Under this divine source of Sufic blessedness, the unimpaired honor of the Wool-clad overcomes mere elegance."

That absorption with the theme of love leads to ecstasy, all Sufis know. But whereas Christian mystics regard ecstasy as a union with God, and therefore the height of religious attainment, Sufis admit its value only if the devotee can afterward return to the world and live in a manner consonant with his experience. Western literature has been profoundly affected by the theme of man's spiritual tempering through love, spread mainly by such Spanish Arabs as the tenth-century Ibn Masarra of Córdoba, Ibn Barrajan of Seville, Abu Bakr of Granada (a Majorcan by birth), and Ibn Qasi of Agarabis in Portugal. The best known Sufi scholar was the twelfth-century

early eighteenth-century London, by a group of Protestant sages who mistook its Saracen terms for Hebrew, has obscured many of its early traditions. Richard Burton, translator of the *Thousand and One Nights*, being both a Freemason and a Sufi, first pointed out the close relation between the two societies, but he was not sufficiently advanced in either to realize that Freemasonry had begun as a Sufi group. Idries Shah Sayed now shows that it was a metaphor for the "reedification," or rebuilding, of spiritual man from his ruined state; and that the three working instruments displayed on modern Masonic lodges represent three postures of prayer. "Buizz" or "Boaz" and "Solomon, Son of David," who are honored by Freemasons as builders at King Solomon's temple at Jerusalem, were not Solomon's Israelite subjects or Phoenician allies as is supposed, but Abdel-Malik's Sufi architects who built the Dome of the Rock on the ruins of Solomon's temple, and their successors. Their real names included Thuban abdel Faiz ("Izz"), and his "great grandson," Mararuf, the son (disciple) of David of Tay, whose Sufic code name was Solomon, because he was the "son of David." The architectural measurements chosen for this Temple, as for the Kaaba building at Mecca, were numerical equivalents of certain Arabic roots conveying holy messages, every part of the building being related to every other in definite proportion.

According to English academic principle, a fish is not the best teacher of ichthyology, nor is an angel of angelology. Hence most authoritative modern books and articles about Sufism are written by historically minded European and American university professors who have never swum in Sufic depths nor soared to ecstatic Sufic heights, and do not even understand Perso-Arabic poetic wordplay. I pleaded with Idries Shah Sayed to remedy this lack of accurate public information, if only to reassure natural Sufis in the West that they are not alone in their peculiar habits of thought, and that their intuitions can be sharpened by others' experience. He consented, though aware that this would be a task of great difficulty. Idries Shah Sayed happens to be in the senior male line of descent from the prophet Mohammed, and to have inherited the secret mysteries from the Caliphs, his ancestors. He is, in fact, a Grand Sheikh of the Sufi *Tariqa* ("Rule"), but since all Sufis are by definition equal and

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responsible only to themselves for their own spiritual achievements, "Sheikh" is a misleading title. It does not mean "leader" so much as "fugleman," the old army term for the soldier who stood in front of a company on the parade ground as an exemplar in arms-drill.

The difficulty that he foresaw (though many years resident in Europe and as conversant with English and the main European languages as with Arabic, Pushtu, Urdu, classical and modern Persian) is that readers of this book must be assumed to have perceptions out of the ordinary, a poetic imagination, a strong sense of honor, and to have already stumbled on the main secret, which is a great deal to expect. Nor does he wish to be thought a missionary. Sufi teachers do their best to discourage disciples, and accept none that come "empty-handed," that is to say, who lack an inborn sense of the central mystery. A disciple learns less from his teacher in the way of literary or therapeutic tradition than from watching him deal with the problems of daily life; and must not plague him with questions but accept on trust a great deal of apparent illogic and foolishness which will make eventual sense. Many of the main Sufic paradoxes are current in the form of comic stories, especially those centered around the Khoja (schoolmaster) Nasrudin, and occur also in the fables of Aesop, whom the Sufis accept as one of their ancestors.

The court fool of the Spanish kings with his bladder stick, his motley clothes, cock crest, jingling bells, simple wisdom and utter disrespect of authority is a Sufi figure. His jokes were accepted by the sovereigns as having a deeper wisdom than the most solemn advice of eldest councillors. When Philip II of Spain was accentuating his persecution of Jews, he decided that every Spaniard with Jewish blood must wear a hat of a certain shape. Foreseeing trouble, the fool appeared the same evening with three such hats. "For whom are these, fool?" asked Philip. "One for me, nuncle, one for thee, and one for the Grand Inquisitor." And since it was true that numerous medieval Spanish aristocrats had married into rich Jewish families, Philip thereupon abandoned his plan. In much the same way, Charles I's court fool Charlie Armstrong (once a Scottish sheep stealer), whom he had inherited from his father, tried to oppose Archbishop Laud's Arminian Church policy, which seemed bound to end in an armed clash with the Puritans. Charles scornfully asked Archie's

advice in religious policy, and was told: "Give great praise to God, nuncle, and little laud to the Devil." Laud, who was touchy about his smallness, had Charlie Armstrong expelled from court; which brought his master no luck.

In effect, this book is not addressed to intellectuals or other orthodox thinkers, or to anyone who will fail to recognize it at once as addressed to himself. The economics of publication will of course distribute the book mostly among readers without much sense of what the author is saying; yet if he had written in a way that they clearly understood, he would have been saying something altogether different. An awkward position; and if anyone deserves the blame for publication, it is myself. Nevertheless Idries Shah Sayed supplies a great deal of unexpected information—besides what I have already quoted—such as the Saracen origin of the rosary and of Hans Andersen's Ugly Duckling, or Chaucer's debt to well-known Sufi poets, emphasizing these secondary phenomena without prejudice to the primary phenomenon of Sufi thought. The book will at least be available to a great number of people who share this peculiar way of thinking with one or two intimate friends, and whom it will doubtless surprise as much as it has surprised me.

DEYA

MAJORCA

Robert Graves

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

17/12/69

The last thing that is intended in the writing of this book is that it should be considered inimical to scholasticism or to the academic method. Scholars of the East and the West have heroically consecrated their whole working lives to making available, by means of their own disciplines, Sufi literary and philosophical material to the world at large. In many cases they have faithfully recorded the Sufis' own reiteration that the Way of the Sufis cannot be understood by means of the intellect or by ordinary book learning. That this fundamental has not prevented them from trying to bring Sufism within the compass of their own understanding is a tribute to their intellectual honesty and their faith in their own system of examination.

It would, however, be false to Sufism not to affirm that it cannot be appreciated beyond a certain point except within the real teaching situation, which requires the physical presence of a Sufi teacher. For the Sufi, it is no accident that the "secret doctrine" whose existence has for uncounted time been suspected and sought proves so elusive to the seeker. If, say, communism is a religion without a god, academic study of Sufism without being to any extent a "working Sufi" is Sufism without its essential factor. If this assertion militates against the rational tradition that an individual can find truth merely through the exercise of the faculties with which he finds himself endowed, there is only one answer. Sufism, the "secret tradition," is not available on the basis of assumptions which belong to another world, the world of intellect. If it is felt that truth about extraphysical fact must be sought only through a certain way of thinking, the rational and "scientific" one, there can be no contact between the Sufi and the supposedly objective seeker.

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Sufi literature and preparatory teaching is designed to help to bridge the gap between these two worlds of thought. Were it not possible to provide any bridge at all, this book would be worthless, and should not have been attempted.

Sufism, considered as a nutrient for society, is not intended to subsist within society in an unaltered form. That is to say, the Sufis do not erect systems as one would build an edifice, for succeeding generations to examine and learn from. Sufism is transmitted by means of the human exemplar, the teacher. Because he is an unfamiliar figure to the world at large, or because he has imitators, does not mean that he does not exist.

We find traces of Sufism in derelict organizations from which this element of human transmission of *baraka* has ceased; where the form alone remains. Since it is this outer shell which is most easily perceptible to the ordinary man, we have to use it to point to something deeper. Unlike him, we cannot say that such and such a ritual, such and such a book, incarnates Sufism. We start with human, social, literary material that is both incomplete (because now unaccompanied by the impact of the living exemplar, the teacher) and secondary, in that it is only partially absorbed. Historical facts, such as religious and social organization, when they persist, are secondary, external phenomena which depend upon organization, emotion and outward show for their survival. These factors, so essential for the continuation of familiar systems, are, Sufistically speaking, only the substitute for the vitality of organism, as distinct from appearance and sentiment.¹

A Sufi school comes into being, like any other natural factor, in order to flourish and disappear, not to leave traces in mechanical ritual, or anthropologically interesting survivals. The function of a nutrient is to become transmuted, not to leave unaltered traces.

The great Sufi teacher Jami refers to this tendency when he says that if the beard is allowed to grow too bushy, it will vie with the hair of the head in its claims for attention or prominence.

It will easily be understood that both the "organic" and "human exemplar" claims of Sufism remove it immediately from the purview of conventional study.

There is, however, some value in paying attention to Sufi influences upon human culture. In the first place, we can observe attempts to bridge the gap between ordinary thinking and Sufi ex-

¹ See annotation "Outlook."

perience, contained in poetic, literary and other media, which have been designed to lead the ordinary, attenuated or embryonic human consciousness into a greater perception and realization. Secondly, it is maintained by Sufis that even in cultures where authoritarian and mechanical thinking have choked comprehensive understanding, human individuality will have to assert itself, somewhere, even if this be only through the primitive sense that life must have more meaning than the officially propagated one.

In this book, emphasis has been placed upon the diffusion of Sufic thought during a certain phase (from the seventh century of the current era) for illustrative purposes. If, in the process, material which is completely new has been presented, this is not done for any purpose of scholastic effort. Scholasticism is interested in accumulating information and making deductions from it. Sufism is engaged upon developing a line of communication with ultimate knowledge, not with combining individual facts, however historically exciting, or theorizing in any way at all.

Sufism, it should be remembered, is Eastern thought only insofar as it retains beliefs—such as the human exemplar—which have fallen into abeyance in the West. It is occult and mystical inasmuch as it follows a path other than that which has been represented as the true one by authoritarian and dogmatic organization. Sufism claims that the latter attitude constitutes only a part, only a phase, in the human story. Claiming a “real” source of knowledge, Sufism cannot accept the pretensions of the temporary phase which, viewed from within itself, is currently considered to be the “logical” one.

A great deal of the material presented here is incomplete because it is not possible to increase the amount of formal literature about Sufism without the balance of Sufic practice. Much of it, nevertheless, is unknown outside traditional Sufi circles. It is not intended to influence traditional scholasticism, with which it has only the most superficial connection; and one which cannot be carried far without distortion.

Sufism is known by means of itself.

It is interesting to note the difference between science as we know it today, and as it was seen by one of its pioneers. Roger Bacon, considered to be the wonder of the middle ages and one of humanity's

greatest thinkers, was the pioneer of the method of knowledge gained through experience. This Franciscan monk learned from the Sufis of the illuminist school that there is a difference between the collection of information and the knowing of things through actual experiment. In his *Opus Mainus*, in which he quotes Sufi authority, he says:

There are two modes of knowledge, through argument and experience. Argument brings conclusions and compels us to concede them, but it does not cause certainty nor remove doubts in order that the mind may remain at rest in truth, unless this is provided by experience.

This Sufi doctrine is known in the West as the scientific method of inductive proceeding, and subsequent Western science is largely based upon it.

Modern science, however, instead of accepting the idea that experience was necessary in all branches of human thought, took the word in its sense of "experiment," in which the experimenter remained as far as possible outside the experience.

From the Sufi point of view, therefore, Bacon, when he wrote these words in 1268, both launched modern science and also transmitted only a portion of the wisdom upon which it could have been based.

"Scientific" thinking has worked continuously and heroically with this partial tradition ever since. In spite of its roots in the work of the Sufis, the impairment of the tradition has prevented the scientific researcher from approaching knowledge by means of itself—by "experience," not merely "experiment."

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6/1/65
(Wednesday)

THE ISLANDERS

The ordinary man repents his sins:
the elect repent of their heedlessness.
(Dhu'l-Nun Misri)

Most fables contain at least some truth, and they often enable people to absorb ideas which the ordinary patterns of their thinking would prevent them from digesting. Fables have therefore been used, not least by the Sufi teachers, to present a picture of life more in harmony with their feelings than is possible by means of intellectual exercises.

Here is a Sufic fable about the human situation, summarized and adapted, as must always be, suitably to the time in which it is presented. Ordinary "entertainment" fables are considered by Sufi authors to be a degenerated or inferior form of art.

Once upon a time there lived an ideal community in a far-off land. Its members had no fears as we now know them. Instead of uncertainty and vacillation, they had purposefulness and a fuller means of expressing themselves. Although there were none of the stresses and tensions which mankind now considers essential to its progress, their lives were richer, because other, better elements replaced these things. Theirs, therefore, was a slightly different mode of existence. We could almost say that our present perceptions are a crude, makeshift version of the real ones which this community possessed.

They had real lives, not semilives.

We can call them the El Ar people.

They had a leader, who discovered that their country was to become uninhabitable for a period of, shall we say, twenty thousand

years. He planned their escape, realizing that their descendants would be able to return home successfully, only after many trials.

He found for them a place of refuge, an island whose features were only roughly similar to those of the original homeland. Because of the difference in climate and situation, the immigrants had to undergo a transformation. This made them more physically and mentally adapted to the new circumstances; coarse perceptions, for instance, were substituted for finer ones, as when the hand of the manual laborer becomes toughened in response to the needs of his calling.

In order to reduce the pain which a comparison between the old and new states would bring, they were made to forget the past almost entirely. Only the most shadowy recollection of it remained, yet it was sufficient to be awakened when the time came.

The system was very complicated, but well arranged. The organs by means of which the people survived on the island were also made the organs of enjoyment, physical and mental. The organs which were really constructive in the old homeland were placed in a special form of abeyance, and linked with the shadowy memory, in preparation for its eventual activation.

Slowly and painfully the immigrants settled down, adjusting themselves to the local conditions. The resources of the island were such that, coupled with effort and a certain form of guidance, people would be able to escape to a further island, on the way back to their original home. This was the first of a succession of islands upon which gradual acclimatization took place.

The responsibility of this "evolution" was vested in those individuals who could sustain it. These were necessarily only a few, because for the mass of the people the effort of keeping both sets of knowledge in their consciousness was virtually impossible. One of them seemed to conflict with the other one. Certain specialists guarded the "special science."

This "secret," the method of effecting the transition, was nothing more or less than the knowledge of maritime skills and their application. The escape needed an instructor, raw materials, people, effort and understanding. Given these, people could learn to swim, and also to build ships.

The people who were originally in charge of the escape operations made it clear to everyone that a certain preparation was necessary before anyone could learn to swim or even take part in building a ship. For a time the process continued satisfactorily.

Then a man who had been found, for the time being, lacking in the necessary qualities rebelled against this order and managed to develop a masterly idea. He had observed that the effort to escape placed a heavy and often seemingly unwelcome burden upon the people. At the same time they were disposed to believe things which they were told about the escape operation. He realized that he could acquire power, and also revenge himself upon those who had undervalued him, as he thought, by a simple exploitation of these two sets of facts.

He would merely offer to take away the burden, by affirming that there was no burden.

He made this announcement:

"There is no need for man to integrate his mind and train it in the way which has been described to you. The human mind is already a stable and continuous, consistent thing. You have been told that you have to become a craftsman in order to build a ship. I say, not only do you not need to be a craftsman—you do not need a ship at all! An islander needs only to observe a few simple rules to survive and remain integrated into society. By the exercise of common sense, born into everyone, he can attain anything upon this island, our home, the common property and heritage of all!"

The tonguester, having gained a great deal of interest among the people, now "proved" his message by saying:

"If there is any reality in ships and swimming, show us ships which have made the journey, and swimmers who have come back!"

This was a challenge to the instructors which they could not meet. It was based upon an assumption of which the bemused herd could not now see the fallacy. You see, ships never returned from the other land. Swimmers, when they did come back, had undergone a fresh adaptation which made them invisible to the crowd.

The mob pressed for demonstrative proof.

"Shipbuilding," said the escapers, in an attempt to reason with the revolt, "is an art and a craft. The learning and the exercise of this

about anything until he is sure that what he thinks is a wrong is in fact a wrong—and not a blessing in disguise!”

Nasrudin, in his capacity as a Sufi teacher, makes frequent use of the dervish technique of himself playing the part of the unenlightened man in the story, in order to highlight a truth. A famous tale denying the superficial belief in cause and effect makes him the victim:

Mulla Nasrudin was walking along an alleyway one day when a man fell from a roof and landed on top of him. The other man was unhurt—but the Mulla was taken to the hospital.

“What teaching do you infer from this event, Master?” one of his disciples asked him.

“Avoid belief in inevitability, even if cause and effect seem inevitable! Shun theoretical questions like: ‘If a man falls off a roof, will his neck be broken?’ *He* fell—but *my* neck is broken!”

Because the average person thinks in patterns and cannot accommodate himself to a really different point of view, he loses a great deal of the meaning of life. He may live, even progress, but he cannot understand all that is going on. The story of the smuggler makes this very clear:

Nasrudin used to take his donkey across a frontier every day, with the panniers loaded with straw. Since he admitted to being a smuggler when he trudged home every night, the frontier guards searched him again and again. They searched his person, sifted the straw, steeped it in water, even burned it from time to time. Meanwhile he was becoming visibly more and more prosperous.

Then he retired and went to live in another country. Here one of the customs officers met him, years later.

“You can tell me now, Nasrudin,” he said. “Whatever *was* it that you were smuggling, when we could never catch you out?”

“Donkeys,” said Nasrudin.

This story also emphasizes one of the major contentions of Sufism—that preternatural experience and the mystical goal is something nearer to mankind than is realized. The assumption that something esoteric or transcendental must be far off or complicated has been assumed by the ignorance of individuals. And that kind of individual

is the least qualified to judge the matter. It is "far off" only in a direction which he does not realize.

Nasrudin, like the Sufi himself, does not violate the canons of his time. But he adds a new dimension to his consciousness, refusing to accept for specific, limited purposes that truth, say, is something that can be measured as can anything else. What people call truth is relative to their situation. And he cannot find it until he realizes this. One of the Nasrudin tales, a most ingenious one, shows that until one can see through relative truth, no progress can be made:

One day Nasrudin was sitting at court. The King was complaining that his subjects were untruthful. "Majesty," said Nasrudin, "there is truth and truth. People must practice real truth before they can use relative truth. They always try the other way around. The result is that they take liberties with their man-made truth, because they know instinctively that it is only an invention."

The King thought that this was too complicated. "A thing must be true or false. I will *make* people tell the truth, and by this practice they will establish the habit of being truthful."

When the city gates were opened the next morning, a gallows had been erected in front of them, presided over by the captain of the royal guard. A herald announced: "Whoever would enter the city must first answer the truth to a question which will be put to him by the captain of the guard."

Nasrudin, who had been waiting outside, stepped forward first.

The captain spoke: "Where are you going? Tell the truth—the alternative is death by hanging."

"I am going," said Nasrudin, "to be hanged on those gallows."

"I don't believe you!"

"Very well, then. If I have told a lie, hang me!"

"But that would *make it* the truth!"

"Exactly," said Nasrudin, "*your* truth."

The would-be Sufi must also understand that standards of good and bad depend upon individual or group criteria, not upon objective fact. Until he experiences this internally as well as accepting it intellectually, he will not be able to qualify for inner understanding. This shifting scale is exemplified by a story of the chase:

A king who enjoyed Nasrudin's company, and also liked to hunt,

In the development of the human mind, there is a constant change and limit to the usefulness of any particular technique. This characteristic of Sufi practice is ignored in repetitious systems, which condition the mind and create an atmosphere of attainment or nearness to attainment, without actually producing it. Nasrudin figures as the character in a story which seeks to make this clear:

The Mulla nearly fell into a pool of water. A passer-by saved him in the nick of time. Every time they met in future, the man reminded Nasrudin about how he had prevented him from getting wet.

Ultimately, unable to stand it any longer, the Mulla took his friend to the pool, jumped in as far as the neck, and shouted: "Now I am as wet as I would have been if I had never met you! Will you leave me alone?"

The ordinary joke or fable, containing only one point or emphasis, cannot be compared to the Nasrudin system—ideally a participation-recital which exercises an inward as well as an outward or superficial effect. The parable, fable and ordinary joke are considered mystically sterile because they lack penetration or true regenerative force.

While the complex ingenuity and intention of the Nasrudin story is far ahead of, say, the Baldakiev figure of the Russians, the Arab Joha, or Bertoldo of the Italians—all well-known comical figures—something of the difference of depth in stories can be assessed by means of the Mulla's jokes and their equivalent in their sporadic occurrence elsewhere.

A Zen story provides an interesting example. In this a monk asks a master to give him a version of the reality beyond reality. The master snatches up a rotten apple; and the monk perceives the truth by means of this sign. We are left in the dark as to what lies behind, or leads up to, the illumination.

The Nasrudin story about an apple fills in a great deal of missing detail: Nasrudin is sitting among a circle of disciples, when one of them asks him the relationship between things of this world and things of a different dimension. Nasrudin says, "You must understand allegory." The disciple says, "Show me something practical—for instance an apple from Paradise."

Nasrudin picks up an apple and hands it to the man. "But this

apple is bad on one side—surely a heavenly apple would be perfect.”

“A celestial apple would be perfect,” says Nasrudin; “but as far as you are able to judge it, situated as we are in this abode of corruption, and with your present faculties, this is as near to a heavenly apple as you will ever get.”

The disciple understood that the terms which we use for metaphysical things are based upon physical terms. In order to penetrate into another dimension of cognition, we have to adjust to the way of understanding of that dimension.

The Nasrudin story, which may well be the original of the apple allegory, is designed to add to the mind of the hearer something of the flavor which is needed to build up the consciousness for experiences which cannot be reached until a bridge has been created.

This gradual building up of inner consciousness is characteristic of the Nasrudin Sufic method. The flash of intuitive illumination which comes as a result of the stories is partly a minor enlightenment in itself, not an intellectual experience. It is also a steppingstone toward the reestablishing of mystical perception in a captive mind, relentlessly conditioned by the training systems of material life.

A Nasrudin joke, detached (perhaps by translation) from its technical terminology, can still pass current on its humorous value. In such cases much of its impact may be lost. An example is the salt and wool joke:

Nasrudin is taking a load of salt to market. His donkey wades through a stream, and the salt is dissolved. When it reaches the opposite bank, the ass is frisky because his load is lightened. But Nasrudin is angry. On the next market day he packs the panniers with wool. The animal is almost drowned with the increase of weight when it takes up water at the ford.

“There!” says Nasrudin triumphantly, “that’ll teach you to think that you gain something every time you go through water!”

In the original story, two technical terms are used, salt and wool. “Salt” (*milh*) is the homonym for “being good, wisdom.” The donkey is the symbol for man. By shedding his burden of general goodness, the individual feels better, loses the weight. The result is that he loses his food, because Nasrudin could not sell the salt to buy fodder. The word “wool” is of course another word for “Sufi.” On the second trip

inner and outer impacts, the behavior of almost anyone will vary in accordance with his mood and his state of health. While this fact is of course recognized in social life, it is not fully admitted in formal philosophy or metaphysics. At best, the individual is expected to create in himself a framework of devoutness or concentration through which it is hoped that he will attain illumination or fulfillment. In Sufism, it is the entire consciousness which has ultimately to be transmuted, starting from the recognition that the unregenerate man is very little more than raw material. He has no fixed nature, no unity of consciousness. Inside him there is an "essence." This is not yoked to his whole being, or even his personality. Ultimately, nobody automatically knows *who* he really is. This in spite of the fiction to the contrary. Thus Nasrudin:

The Mulla walked into a shop one day.

The owner came forward to serve him.

"First things first," said Nasrudin; "did you see me walk into your shop?"

"Of course."

"Have you ever seen me before?"

"Never in my life."

"Then how do you know it is *me*?"

Excellent as this may be as a mere joke, those who regard it as the idea of a stupid man, and containing no deeper significance, will not be people who are in a position to benefit from its regenerative power. You extract from a Nasrudin story only a very little more than you put into it; if it appears to be no more than a joke to a person, that person is in the need of further self-work. He is caricatured in the Nasrudin interchange about the moon:

"What do they do with the moon when it is old?" a stupid man asked the Mulla.

The answer fitted the question: "They cut each old moon up into forty stars."

Many of the Nasrudin tales highlight the fact that people seeking mystical attainment expect it on their own terms, and hence generally exclude themselves from it before they start. Nobody can hope to arrive at illumination if he thinks that he knows what it is, and believes that he can achieve it through a well-defined path which

priest is the result of a development. No such priests exist in familiar religion.

We can carry the Abjad method, where used by organization, much further than isolated cases. In Sufi circles, instead of numerical substitution, rhyme or homonym is used to confuse the noninitiate as to the symbolism of ritual. Several mysterious societies in the West are offshoots of Sufi circles, and can easily be traced back through a knowledge of the Sufi organization, historical possibility, or the secret language. The Builders is one. Another is the Coalmen.

In Arabic (and thence to Persian), the word FeHM, from the Semitic root FHM, means "to understand, perceive." From it are derived the words "to make a person understand," and so on.

A Sufi circle called the *fehmiya* (Perceivers) traces its philosophical pedigree to Bayazid of Bistam. There are two letters "h" in Arabic. A word using the second "h" is also pronounced like FeHM, but means Coalman, or charcoal dealer.

Its members, to commemorate this in ritual, actually put charcoal on their faces. Freemasons are in some Arabic dictionaries called charcoal burners or Coalmen.

An Italian secret society, originally devoted to doing good and to the ends of mutual protection, was called the *Carbonari*, the charcoal burners. There can be no reasonable doubt, on historical, geographical and linguistic evidence, that this is a deteriorated form of the Perceivers. According to Sufi lore, when the dynamic element of a living teacher deserts a circle, it becomes repetitious and loses its interior quality. Whatever may be the truth of this, the *Carbonari* are an excellent example to study.

The myth of the foundation of the *Carbonari* claims that King Francis I of France (died 1515) when out hunting strayed into Scotland, which bordered his territories. He was found and befriended by charcoal burners. These, however, were not ordinary people, but a band of mystics, who had been instructed by an ancient sage. Francis joined them and became their protector. If we realize that the country which bordered France was Spain, and not Scotland, and Sufized Spain at that,¹ we begin to see another line

¹ The last great expulsion of Moslems from Spain was in 1609, when a million unrepentant Moors were deported. In Francis I's time, nothing is more likely than fugitive associations of Sufis in the forests, instructed by "ancients."

1066
face
from
in 1492

of connection with the Sufi charcoal men. "Scotland" seems to be not a mistake, as has been thought, but a code name for Spain. This is borne out by the fact that the Freemasons also state that early lodges were founded in "Scotland," and they speak of "Scottish rites."

From being a mystical society, the *Carbonari* became ethical, then political. They were joined by many Freemasons.² There are many more points of resemblance between the Sufi circle and the Italian. Engravings of *Carbonari* meetings show the members ranged in the same way as in Sufi meetings. The smallest unit of the *Carbonari* was called the *baracca*, the "hut."

But among the Sufi Coalmen, *baraka* is a word for a meeting, originally a signal to call meetings. No less interesting is the fact that it was the reputation of the Sufi Coalmen that they could give a *baraka* (blessing) to brides in country districts. In England even today brides often call in the chimney sweep—with sooty face—to give them a kiss just after the wedding ceremony. El-Aswad, the Black Man, is one of the important and mysterious figures in both North European and Spanish-Arab accounts of witchcraft rites (non-Catholic ceremonies) in many parts of Europe.³

Millions of words could be written on concealed Sufic meanings. Sometimes they are contained in phrases, some of them not very meaningful in their apparent sense, but repeated with a fervor which has baffled the uninitiated. Here is one such slogan.

"Seek knowledge, even as far as China," the phrase which is on all Sufi lips, has more than a literal or even a figurative sense. This meaning is unlocked by analyzing the use of the word "China," interpreted through the secret language.

"China" is the code word for mind concentration, one of the Sufi practices, an essential prerequisite to Sufic development. The

² Secret meanings in rituals and ideas diffused from Spain may thus be considered to remain "in suspension" or fossilized in many contemporary systems, where the original meaning has been lost. It is interesting to note that even in Spain today, some of these meanings may be clearer to simple peasants than they are to the non-Arabist erudite of North Europe. Professor E. G. Browne, the celebrated Orientalist, reports a debased Arabic script as still in use for love letters by Spanish peasants in the early part of this century. (E. G. Browne, *Literary History of Persia*, Cambridge University Press, 1956, Vol. I, p. 9)

³ It is said that, under Louis XVIII and Charles X, over twelve thousand Freemasons in Paris were also *Carbonari* initiates.

SEEKER AFTER KNOWLEDGE

I fear that you will not reach Mecca,
O Nomad!—For the road which you are
following leads to Turkestan.

(Sheikh Saadi, *Rose Garden*,
"On the Manners of Dervishes")

I was sitting one day in the circle of a Sufi teacher in northern India, when a young foreigner was brought in. He kissed the hand of the Sheikh and started to talk. For three and a half years, he said, he had studied religions, mysticism and occultism from books, in Germany, France and Britain. He had moved from one society to another, looking for something which would lead him to the right path. Formal religion did not appeal to him. Collecting all the money he could lay his hands on, he journeyed to the East, and he had wandered from Alexandria to Cairo, from Damascus to Teheran, through Afghanistan, India and Pakistan. He had been in Burma and Ceylon, as well as in Malaya. In all of these places he had talked to, and taken copious notes from, spiritual and religious teachers.

There was no doubt that he had covered an immense amount of ground, physically and otherwise. He wanted to join this Sheikh because he wanted to do something practical, to concentrate upon ideas, to improve himself. And he showed every sign of being more than ready to submit himself to the discipline of a dervish Order.

The Sheikh asked him why he rejected all the other teachings. There were various reasons, he said; different in almost every case. "Tell me some," said the teacher.

The great religions, he said, did not seem to go deep enough. They concentrated upon dogmas. Dogmas had to be accepted before any-

thing else. Zen, as he had met it in the West, was out of touch with reality. Yoga required a fierce discipline if it were not to be "just a fad." The cults which centered around the personality of one man were based upon concentration upon that man. He could not accept the principle that ceremony, symbolism and what he called mimicry of spiritual truths had any true reality.

Among such Sufis as he had been able to contact, a similar pattern seemed to him to obtain. Some had wholehearted discipleship; some used rhythmic movements which seemed like mimicry of something to him. Others taught through recitals indistinguishable from sermons. Some Sufis were wedded to concentration upon theological themes.

Would the Sheikh help him?

"More than you know," said the Sheikh. "Man is developing, whether he knows it or not. Life is one, though in some forms it appears inert. While you live, you are learning. Those who learn through deliberate effort to learn are cutting down on the learning which is being projected upon them in the normal state. Uncultivated men often have wisdom to some degree because they allow the access of the impacts of life itself. When you walk down the street and look at things or people, these impressions are teaching you. If you *try* actively to learn from them, you learn certain things, but they are predetermined things. You look at a man's face. As you look at it questions arise in your mind, and they are answered by your own mind. Is he dark, is he fair? What sort of a man is he? There is also a constant interchange between the other person and yourself.

"This interchange is dominated by your subjectivity. By that I mean that you are seeing what you want to see. This has become an automatic action; you are like a machine, but also a man, only superficially trained. You look at a house. The general and particular characteristics of that house are split up into smaller elements and assessed in your brain. But not objectively—only in accordance with your past experiences. These experiences in modern man include what he has been told. Thus the house will be big or small, nice or not so nice; like your own or not like it. In greater detail, it will have a roof like another, it will have windows which are unusual. The

machine is going around in circles, because it is merely adding to its formal knowledge."

The newcomer looked dazed.

"What I am trying to convey," said the Sheikh, relentlessly, "is that you assess things in accordance with preconceived ideas. This is almost inevitable for the intellectual man. You do not like symbolism in religion, you have decided. Very well, you will seek a religion without symbolism." He paused. "Is that what you mean?"

"I think I mean that the use of symbolism by various bodies does not satisfy me as being genuine or necessary," said the youth.

"Does that mean that you would know if you found a form of using symbols which was correct?" queried the teacher.

"Symbolism and ritual, to me, are not fundamental," replied the would-be disciple, "and it is fundamentals that I seek."

"Would you recognize a fundamental if you saw one?"

"I think so."

"Then the things which we say and do would seem to you to be mere matters of opinion, or tradition, or superficiality; because we *do* use symbols. Others use chants, and movements, and thinking and silence, concentration and contemplation—a dozen other things." The Sheikh paused.

The visitor spoke.

"Do you think the exclusivity of Judaism, the rituals of Christianity, the fasting in Islam, the Buddhist shaven head, to be fundamentals?" Our guest was now warming up to a characteristic intellectual theme.

"The Sufi dictum is that the 'apparent is the bridge to the Real,'" said the Sheikh. "This means, in the case which we are considering, that all these things have a meaning. The meaning may be lost, the performance a mere mockery, a sentimental or misunderstood acting of a part. But, properly used, they are connected in a continuous sense with the true reality."

"So originally all ritual is meaningful and has a necessary effect?"

"Essentially all ritual, symbolism and so on is a reflection of a truth. It may have been concocted, adapted, diverted to other ends; but it represents a truth—the inner truth of what we call the Sufi Way."

"But the practitioners do not know what it means?"

"They may know in one sense, on one level; a level sufficiently deep to propagate the system. But as far as reaching reality and self-development, the use of these techniques is nil."

"Then," said the student, "how do we know who is using the outward signs in the right way, the way of development, and who is not? I can accept that these superficial indications are of potential value, inasmuch as they *could* lead to something else, and we have to start somewhere. But I, for one, could not tell you which system I should follow."

"A moment ago you were applying for admission to our circle," said the Sheikh, "and now I have succeeded in confusing you to such an extent that you admit you cannot judge. Well, that is the essence of it. You *cannot* judge. You cannot use the instruments of carpentry for watchmaking. You have set yourself a task: to find spiritual truth. You have sought this truth in the wrong directions, and interpreted its manifestations in the wrong way. Is it surprising that you will remain in this state? There is one other alternative for you, as you are at present. The excessive concentration upon the theme, the anxiety and emotion which is engendered in you, will ultimately pile up to such an extent that you will seek a relief from it. Then what will happen? Emotion will swamp intellect; and you will either hate religion or—more likely—become converted to some cult which takes the responsibility. You will settle down with the notion that you have found what you sought."

"Is there no other alternative, even assuming that I accept your belief that my emotion can swamp my intellect?" The intellectual training does not take kindly to any suggestion that it is not comprehensive; nor that it can be swamped by emotion. The slight asperity in tone showed that the thinker was asserting itself. This was not lost on the Sheikh.

"The alternative, which you will not take, is detachment. You see, when we detach, we do not do so in the way in which you do. Intellect teaches you to detach your mind from something and view it intellectually. What we have to do is to detach from both intellect and emotion. How can you become accessible to anything if you are using intellect to judge it? Your problem is that what you call in-

tellect is really a series of ideas which alternately take possession of your consciousness. We do not regard intellect as sufficient. Intellect, for us, is a complex of more or less compatible attitudes which you have been trained to regard as one single thing. According to Sufi thinking, there is a level below this, which is a single, small, but vital one. It is the true intellect. This true intellect is the organ of comprehension, existing in every human being. From time to time in ordinary human life it breaks through, producing strange phenomena which cannot be accounted for by the usual methods. Sometimes these are called occult phenomena, sometimes they are thought to be a transcending of the time or space relationship. This is the element in the human being which is responsible for his evolution to a higher form."

"And I have to take this on trust?"

"No, you cannot take it on trust, even if you wanted to do so. If you took it on trust, you would soon abandon it. Even if you were intellectually convinced that it was necessary as a hypothesis, you might very well lose it. No, you have to experience it. This means, of course, that you have to feel it in a way which you feel nothing else. It comes into your consciousness as a truth different in quality from other things which you have been accustomed to regarding as truths. By its very difference you recognize that it belongs to the area which we call 'the other.'"

Our visitor found this difficult to digest, and returned to his established way of thinking. "Are you trying to produce in me a conviction that there is something deeper, and that I feel it? Because if not, I do not see the point of spending so much time on this discussion."

"You will think it very rude of me, I am sure," said the Sheikh amiably, "but I have to say that things are not as you see them. You see, you come here and talk. I talk to you. As a consequence of our talk and thought many things happen. As far as you are concerned, all that has happened is that we have talked. You may feel that you are convinced, or you are not. To us the meaning of the whole event is far greater. Something is happening as a result of this talk. It is happening, as you can well imagine, in the minds of all the people here. But something else is also happening—to you, to me, and else-

where. Something which you understand when you understand it. Take it on the very simple level of cause and effect as normally understood. A man goes into a shop and buys a piece of soap. As a result of this purchase, many things can happen—the shopkeeper has that much more money, more soap may be ordered, and so on. Words spoken in the course of the transaction have an effect, depending upon the condition of mind of the two parties. When the man leaves the shop, there is an additional factor in his life that was not there before—the soap. Many things can happen as a result of this. But to the two main characters, all that has *really* happened is that a piece of soap has been bought and paid for. They have no awareness of the ramifications of this, and little interest in it. It is only when something noteworthy—from their point of view—happens that they think about it again. Then, they will say, 'Fancy that, the man who bought my soap was a murderer,' or perhaps he was a king. Or perhaps he left a counterfeit coin. Every action, like every word, has an effect and a place. This is the basis of the Sufi system-without-a-system. And, as you will have read in innumerable stories, the Sufi moves among the incredible complex of actions and happenings in a state of inner awareness of their meaning."

"I can see what you mean," said the visitor, "but I cannot experience it. If it is true, of course it accounts for quite a number of things. Some occult happenings; prophetic experiences; the failure of all but a very few people to solve riddles of life by merely thinking about them. And it could also mean that a person who is aware of the complex developments all around him can harmonize himself with them to a degree impossible to others. But the price of trying this is the price of throwing away one's previous knowledge. I could not do that."

The Sheikh did not want a verbal victory, and did not close in for a *coup de grâce*. "My friend, a man once hurt his leg. He had to walk with a crutch. This crutch was very useful to him, both for walking and for many other purposes. He taught all his family to use crutches, and they became a part of normal life. It was a part of everyone's ambition to have a crutch. Some were made of ivory, others adorned with gold. Schools were opened to train people in their use, university chairs endowed to deal with the higher aspects

know how. We boil water by bringing together certain elements—the fire, the container, the water.”

“But what about my intellect?”

“That must fall into its right perspective, find its own level, when the present lack of balance of the personality is restored.”

When the visitor had left, someone asked the sage, “Will you comment upon this interview?”

“If I comment upon it,” he said, “it would lose its perfection.”

We had all learned, each in accordance with his status.

The Sufi doctrine of equipoise between extremes has several meanings. Where it applies to discipleship, the capacity to learn from another, it means that the individual must be free from incorrect thinking before he can start to learn. Our Western would-be disciple has to learn that he cannot bring his assumptions about his own capacity to learn into a field where he does not in fact know what it is that he is trying to learn. All he really knows is that he is in some way dissatisfied. All the rest is his own collection of ideas as to what the reason for the dissatisfaction might be, and an attempt to find a cure for the illness which he has diagnosed without first asking himself about his diagnostic abilities.

We have chosen an actual incident involving a Westerner; but this form of thinking is not confined to the West. Similarly, the opposite extreme—the man who wants to submit himself completely to the will of a master—which is said to be characteristic of the Eastern mind, is next to useless. The Seeker must first attain some measure of balance between these two extremes before he can be said to have the capacity to learn.

Both types learn about their capacity to learn mainly from the observation of the Sufi teacher and his way of behaving. As the human exemplar, his doings and sayings are the bridge between the relative incapacity of the student and the position of being a Sufi. Less than one person in a hundred will normally have any conception of either of these two requirements. If the student, by careful study of Sufi literature, does glimpse the principle upon which discipleship works, he will be more than fortunate.

He can find it in Sufic material, providing that he is prepared to read and reread it, to school himself to avoid the automatic asso-

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(Continued from front flap)

world, but not of it,' free from ambition, greed, intellectual pride, blind obedience to custom, or awe of persons higher in rank: that is the Sufi's ideal."

Sufis can identify Sufi stories and influences in the thought and writings of such diverse figures as Aesop, Omar Khayyam, Averroes, Cervantes, Bacon, Chaucer, Dante, and St. John of the Cross, and in such varying disciplines as Islam, Christianity, Zen, existentialism, Yoga, and the Freemasons. "My thesis," says Idries Shah, "is that the bases of a system which has proved so dynamic and yet so anonymous deserve to be studied..." THE SUFIS is the first authoritative, responsible book on Sufism, and as such it fills a colossal gap in Western documentation of Eastern subjects.

Idries Shah, whose full name is Nawab-Zada Sayed Idries Shah el-Hashimi, is Grand Sheikh of the Sufis and the eldest son of the Nawab (the Mohammedan equivalent of Maharajah) of Sardana, near Delhi in India. His family originates from the principality of Paghman in the Hindu Khoosh, where his ancestors have reigned since 1221, and claims the senior descent from Mohammed in Islam. Idries Shah was born at Simla in the Himalayas and lives in London. He has published several books on mystical and occult subjects.

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