

Sufi approach & vision

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Friday feature

SO easy to remember, but so comprehensive, is the Quranic supplication to God asking for 'well-being in this world' and 'well-being in the next world', and 'protection from the torment of fire.' In fact, this prayer confirms what the Sufis, or Muslim mystics, suggest — that every human being, irrespective of where and when one is born, has to complete the life-cycle of three stages of existence, physical, spiritual and eternal, after reckoning and retribution.

In the present period of global unrest and the war against 'terrorism' which is being waged on a universal scale by the 'coalition of the willing', anyone who is for peace and justice is tempted to interpret human life in a different light. Not in terms of the Darwinian dogma of 'struggle for existence and survival of the fittest' and Nietzsche's notion of superman's power to subdue the 'ant-hill of individuals' — the two strands of scientific and philosophical thought that have been the driving spirit of the West since the Victorian era when Christian values of kindness, meekness, charity and altruism were thrown to the winds and overpowering strength and conquering spirit became the ultimate virtues.

For a better change we have to rediscover the meaning of life. And one of the ways to do so is to define human destiny in terms of the sufistic concept of peaceful co-existence and compassion for fellow humans who are, like one's own self, the creation of that one God who brought into being the first human couple in His own image by 'breathing into them some of His own *Rooh* or spirit' (to quote from the Quran - 15:29).

This '*rooh*', or soul, is therefore, of Divine origin and is not subject to decay and death. Thus, it has to be treated as a sacred object deserving of greater care and attention than our body, the physical mould created from earthly substances which must decay and die during our existence in this world. The Sufis lay great stress on cultivating the soul.

What is '*rooh*', or soul? The listeners of the Holy Quran had quizzed and the Prophet (pbuh) looked up to the Almighty whose

exact words defining the soul, as preserved in the Quran (17:85), can be rendered in English thus: "The soul is by command of the Creator and you (humans) have been endowed with only a little knowledge (making it difficult for you to comprehend)."

So, except that the soul is a manifestation of God's creative power, one cannot have specific knowledge about the chemistry of the soul. Command of the creator has been explained in another context thus: "He is the all-Wise Creator; and when He intends a thing, He only has to give the command, 'be' and it happens (36:81-82). So, all of us are alive and active because of God's command 'be'. We cease to be alive when this com-

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mand, or soul, is withdrawn.

The Sufis are not to be compared with the Christian hermits of yore inhabiting medieval monasteries, practising celibacy and penance, neither with the Buddhist monks or '*bhikshus*', shunning worldly pursuits and living on alms collected from door to door. The Quran condemns monasticism as did the holy Prophet who discouraged asceticism and the life style of a recluse having little to do with worldly affairs and concentrating only on prayer and fasting.

The Sufis were known as '*Aarifun*', meaning gnostics, having true knowledge of God's attributes. The leading Sufis were, called '*waliullah*', or lovers of God, who perceive through piety and prayers what the general run of men cannot even think of. They 'understood nature from the inside', as Sayyed Hussain Nasr puts it ("*Science & Civilization in Islam*").

According to him, most of the scientists and mathematicians of Islam's golden period were Sufis as they perceived and knew what the exoteric theologians did not. The Sufis blended intellect with intuition. The latter merely interpreted facts through logic and reasoning.

Human consciousness and all the five senses of perception are governed by the soul; and as human knowledge, or science, progresses and produces better and more effective tools of perception, the senses can see distant images and hear distant messages, and so on, but the limit is the material universe. The senses, though controlled by the soul, cannot perceive objects beyond the realm of matter. But the same senses do see things, hear sounds, taste fruits, smell fragrant flowers and touch articles made of rarest metals, — all of this belonging to a

world outside the material universe — not when one is wide awake but in a dream, which is, according to the Sufis, a temporary phase of freedom of the soul from the confines of the body.

This substantiates their claim that as a person detaches oneself from the 'material pollution', the inner faculty, embedded in the soul, finds a free hand and enables the person to see the inner aspect of things on the spiritual plane.

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meant to face the spiritual world does involve denying oneself the luxuries of life — rich food, fine clothes, a comfortable home and worldly pleasures. The Sufi, in this respect, can be likened to a practical socialist who believes in eliminating the social inequalities and reducing the wide disparity in living conditions of the rich and the poor.

According to the Sufis, the soul and the body of an average person, not initiated in the mysteries of mysticism, are mixed together like cream in milk. To separate the cream, milk has to be boiled and then cooled to let the cream settle on the top of milk in the form of a rich and thick layer. Similarly, after purging the body of its material and carnal desires, through austere and pious living, the soul dominates the body and takes it on the illuminated path where peace prevails and God's blessings are showered on the '*Saalik*', or the wayfarer, on the road to salvation.