From the online library at www.worldwisdom.com

THE METHOD

Martin Lings

Martin Lings *was born in Burnage, Lancashire, in 1909. After taking a degree at Oxford in 1932, he was appointed Lecturer in Anglo-Saxon at the University of Kaunas. His interest in Islam and in Arabic took him to Egypt in 1939, and in the following year he was given a lectureship at Cairo University. In 1952 he returned to England and took a degree in Arabic at London University. From 1970-74 he was Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books at the British Museum (in 1973 his Department became part of the British Library), where he was in special charge of the Quranic manuscripts, amongst other treasures, from 1955. Dr. Lings died in 2005. The following excerpts are from his book* What is Sufism?*, which has become an authoritative source for both mystical doctrine and method.*

Of the voluntary rites of Islam as performed by the Sufis, the invocation of the Name *Allāh* has already been mentioned as by far the most important. There might seem to be a certain contradiction between the opening of the Holy Tradition quoted at the outset of this chapter[1] which sets the obligatory above the voluntary and the Quranic affirmation that *dhikr Allāh*, which is voluntary, is *greater* (see Qur'ān 29:45) even than the ritual prayer, which is obligatory. But it must be remembered that although what is obligatory serves to confer a spiritual rhythm on the flow of the hours, the time that it actually takes is relatively short. The voluntary has therefore a potential precedence over it by being capable of embracing and penetrating the whole of life, and this is what those who practice methodically the invocation aim at making it do. The meaning of the Holy Tradition is clearly that what is a legal obligation cannot be replaced, at the whim of an individual, by something which is not. Thus the Sufis are in agreement that the invocation of the Name, in itself the most powerful of all rites, is only acceptable to God on the basis of the invoker's having performed what is obligatory. It could not be a legal obligation itself for power necessarily means danger; and by no means every novice is allowed to proceed at once to the invocation of the Supreme Name.

[1] Editor's Note: "Nothing is more pleasing to Me, as a means for My slave to draw near unto Me, than worship which I have made binding upon him; and My slave ceaseth not to draw near unto Me with added devotions of his free will until I love him; and when I love him I am the Hearing wherewith he heareth and the Sight wherewith he seeth and the Hand whereby he graspeth and the Foot whereon he walketh" (Bukhārī, Riqāq, 37).

The recitation of the Qur'ān is no doubt the voluntary rite which is most widely spread throughout the Islamic community as a whole. The Sufis may be said to differ from the majority in that when they recite it—or when they listen to it which is ritually equivalent—they do so as a prolongation of *dhikr Allāh*, with no abatement of their aspiration to return to God. The doctrine of the Uncreatedness of the Revealed Book holds out a means of union which is not to be refused. Moreover the soul has need of the Qur'ān as a complement to the Name, being as it is by its very nature what might be called a multiple unity, and its God-given multiplicity demands a certain direct recognition which it is not the Name's function to accord. The following passage will find an echo in every reader of the Qur'ān. But it concerns the Sufis above all, for they alone are fully conscious of the problem it touches on:

> The Qur'ān is, like the world, at the same time one and multiple. The world is a multiplicity which disperses and divides; the Qur'ān is a multiplicity which draws together and leads to Unity. The multiplicity of the holy Book—the diversity of its words, sentences, pictures, and stories—fills the soul and then absorbs it and imperceptibly transposes it into the climate of serenity and immutability by a sort of divine "cunning". The soul, which is accustomed to the flux of phenomena, yields to this flux without resistance; it lives in phenomena and is by them divided and dispersed—even more than that, it actually becomes what it thinks and does. The revealed Discourse has the virtue that it accepts this tendency while at the same time reversing the movement thanks to the celestial nature of the content and the language, so that the fishes of the soul swim without distrust and with their habitual rhythm into the divine net.[2]

The Name and the Book are two poles between which lie a wealth of possibilities of invocation and litany, some being nearer to one pole and some to the other. The recitation of the two Shahādahs, for example and the invocation of the two Names of Mercy are nearer to the Supreme Name, whereas certain long and complex litanies are more comparable to the Qur'ān and as often as not they largely consist of extracts from it. But the Name may be said to have another complement which is very different from the Revealed Book though parallel to it in the sense that it directly recognizes the diffuse nature of the soul, and this is the individual prayer when the suppliant speaks directly to the Divinity as to another person, telling him of his difficulties and his needs, for himself and for those near to him, both

[2] Frithjof Schuon, *Understanding Islam*, p. 50.

living and dead, and asking for favors of various kinds—or not, as the case may be, for it is essential that this prayer should be a spontaneous laying bare of the individual, and no two individuals are alike.

In this connection it must be remembered that night is the symbol of the soul, and that even the unclouded shining of the full moon does not change night into day. Whatever faith the soul may be said to possess can only be very relative as compared with the certainty of the Heart, but it can be more or less a prolongation of that certainty. There is a significant passage in the Qur'ān where Abraham asks God to show him how He brings the dead to life. *Hast thou not faith?* is the divine rejoinder. *Yes, but (show me) so that my heart may be at rest* (2:260) is his answer. These last words could be glossed: So that the certainty in the depth of my being may be left in peace, untroubled by the surface waves of reason and imagination. The answer is accepted and followed by a miracle of vivification, which proves that the soul has a right to certain concessions. It could in fact be said that the purpose of a miracle is to enable the whole soul to partake supernaturally of an "absolute" certainty which is normally the prerogative of the Heart; but a small part of this effect can be produced through that most natural and human means, the individual prayer—not by any superimposition of faith but by the elimination of obstacles and distractions. This prayer, like the recitation of the Qur'ān, is shared by the whole community and is generally considered as an adjunct to the ritual prayer, which it normally follows, preceded by the words of the Qur'ān: *Your Lord hath said: Call upon Me and I will answer you* (40:60). But the majority are not concerned with method, whereas the Sufi Shaykhs insist on this prayer above all for its methodic value, not only as a means of regular communion for the soul but also as a means for it to unburden itself, that is, to unload some of its inevitable cares and anxieties so that it may be, at any rate in its higher reaches, a prolongation of the peace of the Heart rather than a discontinuity. Nor should the gestural value of this prayer be underrated, for the suppliant, head slightly bowed and hands held out with hollowed empty palms upturned, becomes a soul-penetrating incarnation of spiritual poverty.

It may be concluded from what is taught about human perfection that the primordial soul is a unified multiple harmony suspended as it were between the next world and this world, that is, between the Inward and the Outward, in such a way that there is a perfect balance between the pull of the Inward signs—the Heart and beyond it the Spirit—and the *signs on the horizons* (Qur'ān 41:53). This balance has moreover a dynamic aspect in that the Heart sends out through the soul a ray of recognition of the outer signs,

the great phenomena of nature; and these by the impact they make on the senses, give rise to a vibration which traverses the soul in an inward direction, so that with man, the last created being, the outward movement of creation is reversed and everything flows back as it were through his Heart to its Eternal and Infinite Source. But in the fallen soul, where the attraction of the Heart is more or less imperceptible, the balance is broken and the scales are heavily weighted in favor of the outer world.

To ask how the true balance can be restored is one way of asking "What is Sufism?" And the first part of the answer is that the Divine Name must take the place of the veiled Heart, and a movement towards it must be set up in the soul to counteract the pull of the outer world so that the lost harmony can be regained.

The Method by Martin Lings

Features in

Pray Without Ceasing: The Way of the Invocation in World Religion
© 2006 World Wisdom, Inc.
Edited by Patrick Laude
All Rights Reserved. For Personal Usage Only
www.worldwisdom.com