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Chapter I

The Path

Mystics of every race and creed have described the progress of the spiritual life as a journey or a pilgrimage. Other symbols have been used for the same purpose, but this one appears to be almost universal in its range. The Sûfî who sets out to seek God calls himself a "traveler" *(sâlik);* he advances by slow "stages" *(maqâmât)* along a "path" *(tarîqat)* to the goal of union with Reality *(fanâ fi 'l-Haqq)*. Should he venture to make a map of this interior ascent, it will not correspond exactly with any of those made by previous explorers. Such maps or scales of perfection were elaborated by Sûfî teachers at an early period, and the unlucky Muslim habit of systematising has produced an enormous aftercrop. The "path" expounded by the author of the *Kitâb al-Luma'*, perhaps the oldest comprehensive treatise on Sûfism that we now possess, consists of the following seven "stages," each of which (except the first member of the series) is the result of the "stages" immediately preceding it—(1) repentance, (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) satisfaction. The "stages" constitute the *ascetic and ethical* discipline of the Sûfî, and must be carefully distinguished from the so-called "states" *(ahwâl,* plural of *hâl),* which form a similar *psychological* chain. The writer whom I have just quoted enumerates ten "states"—meditation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquillity, contemplation, and certainty. While the "stages" can be acquired and mastered by one's own efforts, the "states" are spiritual feelings and dispositions over which a man has no control:

> They descend from God into his heart, without his being able to repel them when they come or to retain them when they go.

The Sûfî's "path" is not finished until he has traversed all the "stages," making himself perfect in every one of them before advancing to the next, and has also experienced whatever "states" it pleases God to bestow upon him. Then, and only then, is he permanently raised to the higher planes of consciousness which Sûfîs call "the Gnosis" *(ma'rifat)* and "the Truth" *(haqîqat),* where the "seeker" *(tâlib)* becomes the "knower" or "gnostic" *('ârif),* and realizes that knowledge, knower, and known are One.

Having sketched, as briefly as possible, the external framework of the method by which the Sûfî approaches his goal, I shall now try to give some account of its inner workings. The present chapter deals with the first portion of the threefold journey—the Path, the Gnosis, and the Truth—by which the quest of Reality is often symbolized.

Repentance

The first place in every list of "stages" is occupied by repentance *(tawbat)*. This is the Muslim term for "conversion," and marks the beginning of a new life. In the biographies of eminent Sûfîs the dreams, visions, auditions, and other experiences which caused them to enter on the Path are usually related. Trivial as they may seem, these records have a psychological basis, and, if authentic, would be worth studying in detail. Repentance is described as the awakening of the soul from the slumber of heedlessness, so that the sinner becomes aware of his evil ways and feels contrition for past disobedience. He is not truly penitent, however, unless (1) he at once abandons the sin or sins of which he is conscious, and (2) firmly resolves that he will never return

to these sins in the future. If he should fail to keep his vow, he must again turn to God, whose mercy is infinite. A certain well-known Sûfî repented seventy times and fell back into sin seventy times before he made a lasting repentance. The convert must also, as far as lies in his power, satisfy all those whom he has injured. Many examples of such restitution might be culled from the *Legend of the Moslem Saints.*

According to the high mystical theory, repentance is purely an act of divine grace, coming from God to man, not from man to God. Someone said to Râbi'a:

"I have committed many sins; if I turn in penitence towards God, will He turn in mercy towards me?" "Nay," she replied, "but if He shall turn towards thee, thou wilt turn towards Him."

The question whether sins ought to be remembered after repentance or forgotten illustrates a fundamental point in Sûfî ethics: I mean the difference between what is taught to novices and disciples and what is held as an esoteric doctrine by adepts. Any Muslim director of souls would tell his pupils that to think humbly and remorsefully of one's sins is a sovereign remedy against spiritual pride, but he himself might very well believe that real repentance consists in forgetting everything except God.

"The penitent," says Hujwîrî, "is a lover of God, and the lover of God is in contemplation of God: in contemplation it is wrong to remember sin, for recollection of sin is a veil between God and the contemplative."

Sin appertains to self-existence, which itself is the greatest of all sins. To forget sin is to forget self.

This is only one application of a principle which, as I have said, runs through the whole ethical system of Sûfism and will be more fully explained in a subsequent chapter. Its dangers are evident, but we must in fairness allow that the same theory of conduct may not be equally suitable to those who have made themselves perfect in moral discipline and to those who are still striving after perfection.

Over the gate of repentance it is written:

All *self* abandon ye who enter here!

The Sheikh

The convert now begins what is called by Christian mystics the Purgative Way. If he follows the general rule, he will take a director (Sheikh, Pîr, Murshid), *i.e.* a holy man of ripe experience and profound knowledge, whose least word is absolute law to his disciples. A "seeker" who attempts to traverse the "Path" without assistance receives little sympathy. Of such a one it is said that "his guide is Satan," and he is likened to a tree that for want of the gardener's care brings forth "none or bitter fruit." Speaking of the Sûfî Sheikhs, Hujwîrî says:

> When a novice joins them, with the purpose of renouncing the world, they subject him to spiritual discipline for the space of three years. If he fulfils the requirements of this discipline, well and good; otherwise, they declare that he cannot be admitted to the "Path." The first year is devoted to service of the people, the second year to service of God, and the third year to watching over his own heart. He can serve the people, only when he places himself in the rank of servants and all others in the rank of masters, *i.e.* he must regard all, without exception, as being better than himself, and must deem it his duty to serve all alike. And he can serve God, only when he cuts off all his selfish interests relating either to the present or to the future life, and worships God for God's sake alone, inasmuch as whoever worships God for any thing's sake worships himself, not God. And he can watch over his heart, only when his thoughts are collected and every care is dismissed, so that in communion with God he guards his heart from the assaults of heedlessness. When these qualifications are possessed by the novice, he may wear the *muraqqa'at* (the patched frock worn by dervishes) as a true mystic, not merely as an imitator of others.

Shiblî was a pupil of the famous theosophist Junayd of Baghdâd. On his conversion, he came to Junayd, saying:

"They tell me that you possess the pearl of divine knowledge: either give it me or sell it." Junayd answered:

"I cannot sell it, for you have not the price thereof; and if I give it you, you will have gained it cheaply. You do not know its value. Cast yourself headlong, like me, into this ocean, in order that you may win the pearl by waiting patiently."

Shiblî asked what he must do.

"Go," said Junayd, "and sell sulphur."

At the end of a year he said to Shiblî:

"This trading makes you well known. Become a dervish and occupy yourself solely with begging."

During a whole year Shiblî wandered through the streets of Baghdâd, begging of the passers-by, but no one heeded him. Then he returned to Junayd, who exclaimed:

"See now! You are nothing in people's eyes. Never set your mind on them or take any account of them at all. For some time" (he continued) "you were a chamberlain and acted as governor of a province. Go to that country and ask pardon of all those whom you have wronged."

Shiblî obeyed and spent four years in going from door to door, until he had obtained an acquittance from every person except one, whom he failed to trace. On his return, Junayd said to him:

"You still have some regard to reputation. Go and be a beggar for one year more."

Every day Shiblî used to bring the alms that were given him to Junayd, who bestowed them on the poor and kept Shiblî without food until the next morning. When a year had passed in this way, Junayd accepted him as one of his disciples on condition that he should perform the duties of a servant to the others. After a year's service, Junayd asked him:

"What think you of yourself now?" Shiblî replied: "I deem myself the meanest of God's creatures." "Now," said the master, "your faith is firm."

I need not dwell on the details of this training—the fasts and vigils, the vows of silence, the long days and nights of solitary meditation, all the weapons and tactics, in short, of that battle against one's self which the Prophet declared to be more painful and meritorious than the Holy War. On the other hand, my readers will expect me to describe in a general way the characteristic theories and practices for which the "Path" is a convenient designation. These may be treated under the following heads: Poverty, Mortification, Trust in God, and Recollection. Whereas poverty is negative in nature, involving detachment from all that is worldly and unreal, the three remaining terms denote the positive counterpart of that process, namely, the ethical discipline by which the soul is brought into harmonious relations with Reality.

Poverty

The fatalistic spirit which brooded darkly over the childhood of Islam—the feeling that all human actions are determined by an unseen Power, and in themselves are worthless and vain—caused renunciation to become the watchword of early Muslim asceticism. Every true believer is bound to abstain from unlawful pleasures, but the ascetic acquires merit by abstaining from those which are lawful. At first, renunciation was understood almost exclusively in a material sense. To have as few worldly goods as possible seemed the surest means of gaining salvation. Dâwud al-Tâ'î owned nothing except a mat of rushes, a brick which he used as a pillow, and a leather vessel which served him for drinking and washing. A certain man dreamed that he saw Mâlik ibn Dinâr and Mohammed ibn Wâsi' being led into Paradise,

and that Mâlik was admitted before his companion. He cried out in astonishment, for he thought Mohammed ibn Wâsi‘ had a superior claim to the honor. “Yes,” came the answer, “but Mohammed ibn Wâsi‘ possessed two shirts, and Mâlik only one. That is the reason why Mâlik is preferred.”

The Sûfî ideal of poverty goes far beyond this. True poverty is not merely lack of wealth, but lack of desire for wealth: the empty heart as well as the empty hand. The “poor man” *(faqîr)* and the “mendicant” *(dervîsh)* are names by which the Muslim mystic is proud to be known, because they imply that he is stripped of every thought or wish that would divert his mind from God. “To be severed entirely from both the present life and the future life, and to want nothing besides the Lord of the present life and the future life—that is to be truly poor.” Such a *faqîr* is denuded of individual existence, so that he does not attribute to himself any action, feeling, or quality. He may even be rich, in the common meaning of the word, though spiritually he is the poorest of the poor; for, sometimes, God endows His saints with an outward show of wealth and worldliness in order to hide them from the profane.

No one familiar with the mystical writers will need to be informed that their terminology is ambiguous, and that the same word frequently covers a group, if not a multitude, of significations diverging more or less widely according to the aspect from which it is viewed. Hence the confusion that is apparent in Sûfî text-books. When “poverty,” for example, is explained by one interpreter as a transcendental theory and by another as a practical rule of religious life, the meanings cannot coincide. Regarded from the latter standpoint, poverty is only the beginning of Sûfism. *Fuqarâ,* Jâmî says, renounce all worldly things for the sake of pleasing God. They are urged to this sacrifice by one of three motives:

(a) Hope of an easy reckoning on the Day of Judgment, or fear of being punished; *(b)* desire of Paradise; *(c)* longing for spiritual peace and inward composure. Thus, inasmuch

as they are not disinterested but seek to benefit themselves, they rank below the Sûfî, who has no will of his own and depends absolutely on the will of God. It is the absence of "self" that distinguishes the Sûfî from the *faqîr*.

Here are some maxims for dervishes:

> Do not beg unless you are starving. The Caliph Omar flogged a man who begged after having satisfied his hunger. When compelled to beg, do not accept more than you need.
>
> Be good-natured and uncomplaining and thank God for your poverty.
>
> Do not flatter the rich for giving, nor blame them for withholding.
>
> Dread the loss of poverty more than the rich man dreads the loss of wealth.
>
> Take what is voluntarily offered: it is the daily bread which God sends to you: do not refuse God's gift.
>
> Let no thought of the morrow enter your mind, else you will incur everlasting perdition.
>
> Do not make God a sponge to catch alms.

The *nafs*

The Sûfî teachers gradually built up a system of asceticism and moral culture which is founded on the fact that there is in man an element of evil—the lower or appetitive soul. This evil self, the seat of passion and lust, is called *nafs;* it may be considered broadly equivalent to "the flesh," and with its allies, the world and the devil, it constitutes the great obstacle to the attainment of union with God. The Prophet said: "Thy worst enemy is thy *nafs,* which is between thy two sides." I do not intend to discuss the various opinions as to its nature, but the proof of its materiality is too curious to be omitted. Mohammed ibn 'Ulyân, an eminent Sûfî, relates

that one day something like a young fox came forth from his throat, and God caused him to know that it was his *nafs*. He trod on it, but it grew bigger at every kick that he gave it. He said:

"Other things are destroyed by pain and blows: why dost thou increase?" "Because I was created perverse," it replied; "what is pain to other things is pleasure to me, and their pleasure is my pain."

The *nafs* of Hallâj was seen running behind him in the shape of a dog; and other cases are recorded in which it appeared as a snake or a mouse.

Mortification

Mortification of the *nafs* is the chief work of devotion, and leads, directly or indirectly, to the contemplative life. All the Sheikhs are agreed that no disciple who neglects this duty will ever learn the rudiments of Sûfism. The principle of mortification is that the *nafs* should be weaned from those things to which it is accustomed, that it should be encouraged to resist its passions, that its pride should be broken, and that it should be brought through suffering and tribulation to recognize the vileness of its original nature and the impurity of its actions. Concerning the outward methods of mortification, such as fasting, silence, and solitude, a great deal might be written, but we must now pass on to the higher ethical discipline which completes the Path.

Self-mortification, as advanced Sûfîs understand it, is a moral transmutation of the inner man. When they say, "Die before ye die," they do not mean to assert that the lower self can be essentially destroyed, but that it can and should be purged of its attributes, which are wholly evil. These attributes—ignorance, pride, envy, uncharitableness, etc.—are extinguished, and replaced by the opposite qualities, when the will is surrendered to God and when the mind is con-

centrated on Him. Therefore "dying to self" is really "living in God." The mystical aspects of the doctrine thus stated will occupy a considerable part of the following chapters; here we are mainly interested in its ethical import.

The Sûfî who has eradicated self-will is said, in technical language, to have reached the "stages" of "acquiescence" or "satisfaction" *(ridâ)* and "trust in God" *(tawakkul)*.

A dervish fell into the Tigris. Seeing that he could not swim, a man on the bank cried out, "Shall I tell someone to bring you ashore?" "No," said the dervish. "Then do you wish to be drowned?" "No." "What, then, do you wish?" The dervish replied, "God's will be done! What have I to do with wishing?"

Trust in God

"Trust in God," in its extreme form, involves the renunciation of every personal initiative and volition; total passivity like that of a corpse in the hands of the washer who prepares it for burial; perfect indifference towards anything that is even remotely connected with one's self. A special class of the ancient Sûfîs took their name from this "trust," which they applied, so far as they were able, to matters of everyday life. For instance, they would not seek food, work for hire, practice any trade, or allow medicine to be given them when they were ill. Quietly they committed themselves to God's care, never doubting that He, to whom belong the treasures of earth and heaven, would provide for their wants, and that their allotted portion would come to them as surely as it comes to the birds, which neither sow nor reap, and to the fish in the sea, and to the child in the womb.

These principles depend ultimately on the Sûfistic theory of the divine unity, as is shown by Shaqîq of Balkh in the following passage:

> There are three things which a man is bound to practice. Whosoever neglects any one of them must needs neglect them all, and whosoever cleaves to any one of them must needs cleave to them all. Strive, therefore, to understand, and consider heedfully.
>
> The *first* is this, that with your mind and your tongue and your actions you declare God to be One; and that, having declared Him to be One, and having declared that none benefits you or harms you except Him, you devote all your actions to Him alone. If you act a single jot of your actions for the sake of another, your thought and speech are corrupt, since your motive in acting for another's sake must be hope or fear; and when you act from hope or fear of other than God, who is the lord and sustainer of all things, you have taken to yourself another god to honor and venerate.
>
> *Secondly,* that while you speak and act in the sincere belief that there is no God except Him, you should trust Him more than the world or money or uncle or father or mother or any one on the face of the earth.
>
> *Thirdly,* when you have established these two things, namely, sincere belief in the unity of God and trust in Him, it behoves you to be satisfied with Him and not to be angry on account of anything that vexes you. Beware of anger! Let your heart be with Him always, let it not be withdrawn from Him for a single moment.

The "trusting" Sûfî has no thought beyond the present hour. On one occasion Shaqîq asked those who sat listening to his discourse:

"If God causes you to die to-day, think ye that He will demand from you the prayers of to-morrow?" They answered: "No; how should He demand from us the prayers of a day on which we are not alive?" Shaqîq said:

"Even as He will not demand from you the prayers of to-morrow, so do ye not seek from Him the provender of to-morrow. It may be that ye will not live so long."

In view of the practical consequences of attempting to live "on trust," it is not surprising to read the advice given to

those who would perfectly fulfil the doctrine: "Let them dig a grave and bury themselves." Later Sûfîs hold that active exertion for the purpose of obtaining the means of subsistence is quite compatible with "trust," according to the saying of the Prophet, "Trust in God and tie the camel's leg." They define *tawakkul* as an habitual state of mind, which is impaired only by self-pleasing thoughts; *e.g.* it was accounted a breach of "trust" to think Paradise a more desirable place than Hell.

What type of character is such a theory likely to produce? At the worst, a useless drone and hypocrite preying upon his fellow-creatures; at the best, a harmless dervish who remains unmoved in the midst of sorrow, meets praise and blame with equal indifference, and accepts insults, blows, torture, and death as mere incidents in the eternal drama of destiny. This cold morality, however, is not the highest of which Sûfism is capable. The highest morality springs from nothing but love, when self-surrender becomes self-devotion. Of that I shall have something to say in due time.

Recollection

Among the positive elements in the Sûfî discipline there is one that Muslim mystics unanimously regard as the keystone of practical religion. I refer to the *dhikr,* an exercise well known to Western readers from the careful description given by Edward Lane in his *Modern Egyptians,* and by Professor D. B. Macdonald in his recently published *Aspects of Islam.* The term *dhikr*—"recollection" seems to me the most appropriate equivalent in English—signifies "mentioning," "remembering," or simply "thinking of"; in the Koran the Faithful are commanded to "remember God often," a plain act of worship without any mystical savour. But the Sûfîs made a practice of repeating the name of God or some religious formula, *e.g.* "Glory to Allah" *(subhân Allah)*, "There is

no god but Allah" *(lâ ilâha illa 'llah),* accompanying the mechanical intonation with an intense concentration of every faculty upon the single word or phrase; and they attach greater value to this irregular litany, which enables them to enjoy uninterrupted communion with God, than to the five services of prayer performed, at fixed hours of the day and night, by all Muslims. Recollection may be either spoken or silent, but it is best, according to the usual opinion, that tongue and mind should co-operate. Sahl ibn 'Abdallah bade one of his disciples endeavor to say "Allah! Allah!" the whole day without intermission. When he had acquired the habit of doing so, Sahl instructed him to repeat the same words during the night, until they came forth from his lips even while he was asleep. "Now," said he, "be silent and occupy yourself with recollecting them." At last the disciple's whole being was absorbed by the thought of Allah. One day a log fell on his head, and the words "Allah, Allah" were seen written in the blood that trickled from the wound.

Ghazâlî describes the method and effects of *dhikr* in a passage which Macdonald has summarized as follows:

> Let him reduce his heart to a state in which the existence of anything and its non-existence are the same to him. Then let him sit alone in some corner, limiting his religious duties to what is absolutely necessary, and not occupying himself either with reciting the Koran or considering its meaning or with books of religious traditions or with anything of the sort. And let him see to it that nothing save God most High enters his mind. Then, as he sits in solitude, let him not cease saying continuously with his tongue, *"Allah, Allah,"* keeping his thought on it. At last he will reach a state when the motion of his tongue will cease, and it will seem as though the word flowed from it. Let him persevere in this until all trace of motion is removed from his tongue, and he finds his heart persevering in the thought. Let him still persevere until the form of the word, its letters and shape, is removed from his heart, and there remains the idea alone, as though

> clinging to his heart, inseparable from it. So far, all is dependent on his will and choice; but to bring the mercy of God does not stand in his will or choice. He has now laid himself bare to the breathings of that mercy, and nothing remains but to await what God will open to him, as God has done after this manner to prophets and saints. If he follows the above course, he may be sure that the light of the Real will shine out in his heart. At first unstable, like a flash of lightning, it turns and returns; though sometimes it hangs back. And if it returns, sometimes it abides and sometimes it is momentary. And if it abides, sometimes its abiding is long, and sometimes short.

Another Sûfî puts the gist of the matter in a sentence, thus:

> The first stage of *dhikr* is to forget self, and the last stage is the effacement of the worshipper in the act of worship, without consciousness of worship, and such absorption in the object of worship as precludes return to the subject thereof.

Recollection can be aided in various ways. When Shiblî was a novice, he went daily into a cellar, taking with him a bundle of sticks. If his attention flagged, he would beat himself until the sticks broke, and sometimes the whole bundle would be finished before evening; then he would dash his hands and feet against the wall. The Indian practice of inhaling and exhaling the breath was known to the Sûfîs of the ninth century and was much used afterwards. Among the Dervish Orders music, singing, and dancing are favorite means of inducing the state of trance called "passing-away" *(fanâ),* which, as appears from the definition quoted above, is the climax and *raison d'être* of the method.

Meditation

In "meditation" *(murâqabat)* we recognize a form of self-concentration similar to the Buddhistic *dhyâna* and *samâdhi.*

This is what the Prophet meant when he said, "Worship God as though thou sawest Him, for if thou seest Him not, yet He sees thee." Any one who feels sure that God is always watching over him will devote himself to meditating on God and no evil thoughts or diabolic suggestions will find their way into his heart. Nûrî used to meditate so intently that not a hair on his body stirred. He declared that he had learned this habit from a cat which was observing a mouse-hole, and that she was far more quiet than he. Abû Sa'îd ibn Abi 'l-Khayr kept his eyes fixed on his navel. It is said that the Devil is smitten with epilepsy when he approaches a man thus occupied, just as happens to other men when the Devil takes possession of them.

This chapter will have served its purpose if it has brought before my readers a clear view of the main lines on which the preparatory training of the Sûfî is conducted. We must now imagine him to have been invested by his Sheikh with the patched frock *(muraqqa'at* or *khirqat),* which is an outward sign that he has successfully emerged from the discipline of the "Path," and is now advancing with uncertain steps towards the Light, as when toil-worn travelers, having gained the summit of a deep gorge, suddenly catch glimpses of the sun and cover their eyes.

"The Path"

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