

*(I attempted this article in 2003 but have long felt dissatisfied with it - here is a second attempt to try to describe this important concept - I have removed the first attempt).*

The short article presented below may be difficult for someone without any background in the ways of spiritual development of the Sufis. If you are just browsing you might prefer some of the other articles available on the site.

## **A Theory for the Integration of the Spiritual Faculties**

In this article we march rapidly from very general considerations regarding society and the individual soul to concerns with the organisation of the spiritual faculties. The complete success of this organisation presupposes the complete purification of the spiritual faculties. The aim of most seekers and probably many readers is to reach that purification rather than concern themselves with anything beyond that - nevertheless we can potentially gain some insights that may be beneficial to our efforts of self purification. Points of interest may be found en-route so to speak.

The world is in a sorry and sad state, we find divisions and strife - between continents, between countries, between cultures, and between different ethnic or racial groups. There is separation and conflict between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless, between religions, between ideologies, between classes, between families and even between members of the same family or group. Perhaps it was 'ever thus' or perhaps it is, as it sometimes appears, even more dire and dreadful than ever before.

What is certainly true is that what applies to continents, and countries, and groups, and families, also applies within the individual's own self. So many people feel torn and divided within, they are not at peace with themselves or with their surroundings. They feel anxiety, stress and strain. They are in a state of war within themselves.

At every turn it seems they must face difficult decisions - they want inward peace but they want the conveniences and toys of the modern market place. They want happiness - but also the excitement of a hectic world and busy life. They want traditional values - but they also want modern 'freedoms'. They want an ordered society, but they also want to be free to do what they want regardless of others. The competing ambitions can be a source of unhappiness and discontent. Some try to solve this by retreating from worldly involvement altogether. Some try to solve it by throwing themselves into worldly

involvement with vigour. Some seek a third route of living within the world whilst remaining inwardly detached from it.

The existence of such dichotomies or tensions in the minds of people suggests a deeper underlying dichotomy in the soul of man. It may surprise you to know that Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi, one of the greatest Sufi saints and thinkers of his own, or any time, recognised that, even at the astonishing heights of spiritual development that he had reached, still discovered divergent tendencies within the soul that required reconciling.

Briefly, they are the tendency of the various spiritual faculties such as the heart, the rational soul etc(see below) of the purified man to fuse into a whole when the divine inspiration appears - this he called the Way of the Saints. The second tendency was for each faculty to be to be separately purified but to remain distinct - which Shah Saheb called 'the Prophetic Way' because it distinguishes certain traits inherent in the role of prophecy - rather than being specific to the holy prophet Muhammed (saw) himself - though it is interesting to note that prior to the Miraj the holy Prophet had his heart (one of the faculties) removed and purified before being returned to his body.

I suppose one can more easily get to grips with the underlying issue if one considers it on the less grand sounding level of managing divine intoxication. Put simply, the question at one level is how to be simultaneously intoxicated with God and made sober by God? Not, of course, by merely being drunk and acting sober - only the really drunk man would think his inebriation was not evident in spite of his acting - though those on the Way will well understand that at times such an attempted dissimulation becomes necessary, and therefore justified, in their dealings with the outside world.

Whether historically accurate or not, the story of the dialogue between Mevlana Rumi and Hazrat Shems Tabrizi at their first meeting characterises this dichotomy well. Hz Shems is said to have asked Mevlana, 'Who is greater, Bayazid Bistami, who said everything beneath his cloak was God, or the Holy Prophet Mohammed who said: 'I did not know God as well as it was my duty to know Him?' ; since both must have been speaking the truth.

Mevlana's answer was that the Holy Prophet was greater because he had draught after draught of the wine of revelation but remained sober, whilst Bayazid became intoxicated after one draught of Divine Grace. Ishq or Ashq (divine Love) is one of the names given to this intoxication and can be associated with a fusion of all the spiritual faculties.

Shah Saheb, it seems, sought to find the way to reconcile the prophetic and saintly way. If you want to understand all this more deeply, and particularly about the purification process for the various faculties, then I recommend his wonderful little work (Alt al-Quds) which has been translated

as 'The Sacred Knowledge' (Octagon Press). Here we largely restrict ourselves to the dichotomy between spiritual intoxication and sobriety.

At an ordinary human level excessive sobriety makes for a dull, repressed and potentially repressing individual; excessive intoxication (spiritual or literal) makes for a chaotic personality. None of this would of course apply to the Messenger or to Hazrat Bayazid who are far beyond such criticism, overt or implied, nor to the purified saint.

The stars and planets as Signs, of course demonstrate one kind of answer, each intoxicated in their own rotation yet moving in a stately way in the courses prescribed for them - which seems implied in some of the Qur'anic references to them.

The Mevlevi 'Sema' dance of the 'whirling Dervishes' has the spinning dervishes in their white skirts each rotating round their own axis and also within a given orbit. The Shaykh, normally stationary at his post moves forward at the end of a cycle and begins a much, much, slower and more stately turning in his black robe in the centre of the area. This is the real turning - of the axis. One could speculate that the physical universe may have a slowly rotating centre responsible for the 'expanding universe' effect but that would be well beyond our area of concern.

Shah Saheb however spoke of all this in terms of his research into the 'faculties': the heart, intellect, lower soul (Nafs al-Amarah), the Rational soul, the Spirit, The Deeply Concealed, the Nasamah, and so on) and also put it in a social context in an interesting way..We need first to establish an understanding of the relationship between external social structures and the inner workings of the soul. Let us first consider a topical social context.

The recent 'Arab Spring' gives us one indication of how this apparently purely internal process of intoxication or sobriety applies socially as well as to an individual's spiritual development. Protesters, inspired by 'freedom' and the need to improve their society, seek to overthrow a dictator and the state apparatus. The state apparatus - particularly the army and police representing the sober and controlling force oppose this

If the heady wine of 'freedom' is sufficiently strong the army and state dissolve, order breaks down and a risky chaos ensues.

If on the other hand the state successfully suppresses the intoxicating desire for liberty they do so because the order they have themselves holds firm. Their discipline and control mechanisms maintain order within themselves and thus can exert their sobering (and possibly repressive) order on the populace.

Neither outcome would appear entirely satisfactory on its own. A different kind of structure is required to facilitate a solution.

We are not concerned with a specific social situation here but to understand that these situations can provide a parable for the processes within us. If we apply this situation to our own inner state we see that development and improvement depend to a great extent on the ways in which our underlying faculties are organised as well as how they are purified.

This begins to link the issue of spiritual drunkenness and sobriety in the individual soul by comparing it with social phenomena but we need to go further. Shah Saheb's theory of social development in which one more sophisticated layer of social development succeeds another, each being dependent on the previous one being stabilised in order to do so, gives us the key to this.

Think of society as a circular core with layer after layer of concentric circles expanding it - in which the most basic needs having been met securely (the core). Increasingly sophisticated mechanisms are added concentrically once stability is established in the preceding layer.

To take a single example: at a primitive social level an organised transport system is not necessary - only the means to eat and drink and sleep, but as the social sophistication increases such things become important to maintain the core survival requirements, and thus becomes a fresh layer. Each layer or system functions within its own parameters but is dependent on the stability of the more central layers and must work with the other layers. Rather than each layer having a separate axis all share the same axis.

Let us put it in a more graphically powerful way. Suppose we envisage the growth of a city state.

Initially a core building/structure is established that is able to provide the bare necessities for survival for everyone. As this functions well so additional buildings/structures arise that can facilitate this production and enable it to reach people better. Around these structures more complex structures begin to appear, providing facilities to enable these support mechanisms to function better, perhaps an army to protect the resources, housing for labour etc. In short a complete infrastructure. The process continues until a city emerges. Each layer provides support to the previous layers. Each layer however far it is apparently removed from the core function nevertheless existing primarily to support that core purpose of survival. Each layer develops its specific rules and develops a degree of autonomy that nevertheless leaves it subservient to the prime function of the centre. Now if Allah is pleased and causes an effulgence of divine blessings to flow - perhaps in the form of improved harvest, the discovery of some valuable natural resource etc - the core function is enhanced and all the supportive mechanisms are likewise caused to receive their share of the enhancement.

If, however, the separate layers of the infrastructure develop in complete autonomy losing sight of the core purpose of the whole system (to enhance the survival function of the centre) then the flow from the centre is less effective and though the separate units retain their functions their response to an inflow of good fortune are muted and have to be somewhat laboriously translated into the systems and functions appropriate to that unit.

If on the other hand the separate layers of infrastructure have no autonomy at all then whatever affects the centre affects them immediately and can impair or even overpower their specific functions. The whole city runs the risk of being *'like her who unravels her yarn, which she has spun, after it has become strong'*. ((Qur 217; 16:92). The ideal then is to have units of infrastructure that have sufficient independence to ensure their specific functions are maintained and indeed developed, but sufficient dependence to ensure they receive and respond to anything affecting the core purpose of the centre and thus the whole.

I call this ideal 'integration' and I think it is transferable as a model for the inward state.

We can also relate this to our own daily experience of society. At any given point we will be involved in one or another or even several of the infrastructure elements that make up our own real city or our daily life. For example transport, engineering, finance, utilities, the arts, education and so on. In doing so we adapt to the particular processes of each; ideally however neither does the individual experiencing that particular 'system' lose sight of what is central to his needs ( i.e. survival), nor does the system itself fail to recognise that it is subservient to that same overriding need.

Just so within ourselves our consciousness may be involved temporarily in one faculty, say the heart, but not lose sight of the core purpose that underpins it and all the faculties - which in this case is not material survival but spiritual survival and indeed growth. Equally the faculty itself remains aware that its autonomy is limited by its shared dependence on the core need of spiritual survival and it keeps the route to that wide open and free of obstruction. Thus when divine blessings flow in to meet that core need those blessings are evenly distributed all faculties but transformed by each to meet its own specific functional needs. The heart calls it love and processes it in its unique way; the intellect calls it illumination and does likewise. The bodily soul perceives it as energy and responds in its own way.

In short, the heart expands with joy and love as proper to its function, the intellect with higher levels of understanding, the faculty governing the body with discipline and control over its own bestiality and even the body itself with

increased health and well being, and the whole with growth and development towards full humanity.

In Sufism this organisation of the faculties of the soul is the inner work of the spiritual guide. Outwardly he may suggest certain practices that help in this process. In the case that the organisation of the particular soul is not ready to receive an unlimited flow of inspiration he limits it. In the case that the soul is organised but lacking inspiration he facilitates its flow.

It is worth bearing in mind too that the holy Qur'an frequently refers to learning lessons from societies that have failed in the past; implicitly both as a social lesson and as a spiritual lesson for the individual. Clearly some societies (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah) failed to find the structures to cope with the flow of inspiration, channelling it towards the lower animal nature and transforming its potential benefits instead into corruption and hedonism, and thus becoming only fit for destruction. A concentrated increase in the spiritual flow\* (the visit by the angels etc) resulted in that destruction.

Some societies perished because the spiritual flow was blocked (e.g. by ingratitude) and they collapsed more slowly but inevitably. As the holy book puts it: *'Have you considered who will bring you pure running water, if your water drains away; (Qur'an 21:71; 67:30)*

Bringing order and well being to our own internal city state, ensuring that its elements such as its police and army are neither lax nor too strict: its transport runs smoothly; that a structure exists to allow legitimate expressions of emotion or fulfilment of the various appetites without excess; that the education system is effective but also life enhancing, and so on;- all of this and so much more is the real inner work we are engaged in throughout our life.

In all of this the core need for maintaining spiritual 'survival' is central. Put another way the need for truly living rather than merely existing is our overriding concern and the purpose of all our effort. Spiritual growth is implicit since it will not have escaped your notice that integral to the survival function at the heart of the city is the inherent need for growth or expansion, which in our parable brings about the development of the support structures in the first place. By inherent I mean to imply - God given.

The relationship between the internal individual reality and the external social realities is often not appreciated, but this is why it is sometimes said: *'In order to change society - first change yourself'*.

The role of the Sufi, who has become integrated within him or herself by dint of the guidance he has received, is in a sense to be the model for that particular society. In the case of the Holy Prophet Muhammed (saw) and indeed earlier prophets such as Lord Jesus, that 'society' extends to an entire religion. The Qur'an says *'in the Prophet you have a perfect model'*. In the case

of a saint there is usually a lesser sphere of influence. This of course is the underlying sense in which saints can and should be legitimately referred to as spiritual Kings or Emperors.

To summarise I have tried by means of a parable, and very much riding a horse kindly provided by Shah Wali Ullah of Delhi, to bring into the readers awareness a model that resolves the dichotomy between complete spiritual intoxication and complete spiritual sobriety. At a deeper level this may also pertain to the dichotomy between the saintly way and the prophetic way, but in that, as in everything else, Allah knows better.

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[Here is a link to a follow up article on this topic.](#)