

## **Sufi Aesthetic Taste: A Study of Methodology and Objectives**

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### **Abstract**

This paper adopts the analytical approach of aesthetic taste, aligning with the methodology embraced by the Sufis themselves. Its objective is to illuminate the depth of Sufism, transcending surface-level criticisms and acknowledging its universal significance across civilizations. Additionally, it acknowledges the extraordinary wisdom of Sufism, as recognized by philosophers and psychologists who have explored the unique experiences and expressions of Sufis beyond ordinary consciousness. The study asserts that the true value of Sufism lies in its capacity to provide insights into the profound dimensions of human existence, bridging the gap between materialism and spirituality. It cultivates a distinctive aesthetic and ethical perspective that enriches both individuals and societies. The Sufi journey toward knowledge and proximity to God relies on nurturing an aesthetic taste, emotions, and conscience. Sufi perception goes beyond conventional knowledge, demanding complete immersion in faith and aesthetic perception grounded in spiritual experiences. This mode of perception fosters genuine faith and the elimination of blameworthy inclinations. Virtuous conduct in Sufism encompasses both outward behaviour and inner disposition, constituting an integral part of the Sufi path. Adherents believe that it plays a crucial role in their spiritual journey. Critiques of Sufism often arise from misunderstandings and preconceived notions perpetuated by individuals lacking profound insights into its tenets, including aesthetic taste, the value placed on human existence, and the character and ethical conduct of the soul. This unique aesthetic taste approach paves the way for divine approval, forging an intimate bond that transcends earthly preoccupations.

**Key Words:** Sufi, Aesthetic Taste, Methodology, Objectives.

## Introduction

There is often a sense of dismay when observing certain individuals who, in a peculiar amalgamation, intermingle elements of veracity and illusion, knowledge and superstition, and truth and the inherent contradictions found in falsehoods and allegations. Sufism, the focal point of this study, is unequivocally embraced and esteemed by erudite proponents with profound veneration, and it is imbued with the attributes of veracity. However, in both historical and contemporary contexts, Sufism encounters criticism, assertions, and staunch opposition.

It is indeed remarkable to observe certain factions endowing Sufism with mysticism and a reliance on superstition, while simultaneously opposing it under the auspices of modern science, philosophical rationalism, or empirical scientific reasoning. In so doing, they estrange Sufism from its aesthetic taste verities and cognizance, thereby failing to acknowledge its aesthetic methodology to which these disciplines and bodies of knowledge are subservient.

As a specialist in this venerable discipline, it grieves me to witness such confounding perplexity, indicative of a dearth in intellectual and moral values. My intent is not to defend Sufism against the fallacies presented by its adversaries. Instead, this study aims to provide an exposition on Sufism, focusing on its literary aspects and refined sensibilities within the context of its methodological framework, goals, and objectives. The ultimate goal is to enable discerning readers to assess whether Sufism genuinely embodies these qualities or if it contradicts the depictions offered by its detractors, who persistently cling to their misconceptions while disregarding the underlying truths.

The passage underscores the criticism of those who deny the historical and spiritual significance of Islamic Sufism, deeming it disturbing that clear truths are often dismissed using inadequate tools or methods. Sufism in Islam is described as an inherent spiritual revolution that occurs within practitioners, guided by

personal taste, and addressing religious and creedal matters<sup>1</sup>. It emphasizes that Sufism is essentially the culmination of a servant's devotion through adherence to religious texts, emphasizing self-purification and contemplation to elevate spiritual orientation within the framework of Islamic faith. If Sufism is indeed a spiritual revolution, it is founded on the principles of Islamic creed and does not cease at a limited boundary; rather, it strives to attain true knowledge of God. This highlights the substantial distinction between merely possessing knowledge of Islamic creed and actively living it as a profound and lifelong commitment to attaining true knowledge of God.

In the first scenario, creed remains a mere opinion and an external study, isolated from the heartfelt and practical inspirations. In the second scenario, the believer progresses towards the realm of gnosis (*ma'rifah*). Here, creed unites with knowledge, and the entire human entity becomes unified within itself, not divided or scattered into disparate parts, each seeking to fulfill its own needs, causing human concerns to dissipate and fragment. Instead, within the framework of creed, the individual's spiritual orientation becomes purely directed towards seeking the ultimate and higher truths, rising above worldly concerns, and elevating itself towards the grand values within the ideological principle to which it is loyal: monotheism (*tawhid*).

If a person's belief system lacks a deep understanding of God, it becomes ineffective and unable to inspire meaningful actions. Conversely, when one possesses profound knowledge of God, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a successful endeavour, particularly in the realm of gnosis. What truly matters is a sincere commitment to this quest, the removal of obstacles, and unwavering dedication marked by absolute certainty free from doubt. In this context, religious behaviour aligns with the believer's creed, to which they pledge unwavering loyalty.

<sup>1</sup> Abd al-Wahhab Al-Sha'rani. *Lawa'ih Al-Anwar Fi Tabaqat Al-Akhyar*. Maktaba Subhi, 1363 AH. Vol. 1, 4.

The central and pivotal element in understanding the essence of Sufism in this respect is what is commonly referred to as the "Sufi experience." This term encapsulates a profound and transformative journey that individuals undertake within the Sufi tradition. The Sufi experience is characterized by a deep and intimate connection with the divine, marked by a sense of direct spiritual communion with God. It often involves intense spiritual practices, such as meditation, prayer, and introspection, aimed at transcending the ego and worldly attachments.

The study is adopting the analytical approach of aesthetic taste, which is the approach of the Sufis themselves. We adopt it as they did, seeking to uncover their orientations and objectives. The research encompasses the following points:

### **(1) Heightened Consciousness, Not Ordinary Awareness:**

Much of the critiques and provocations about Sufism are due to disparagement and falsehoods propagated by ignorance or prejudice. These critiques are typically the product of individuals lacking profound insights. They tend to be guided by their theoretical beliefs or rationalistic tendencies, or are influenced by non-scientific motivations that hinder a comprehensive and rigorous examination of Sufism as a noteworthy cultural and spiritual phenomenon within the realm of human consciousness.

#### **• *Sufism Across Civilizations:***

There is hardly any global civilization that has not had its own form of Sufism. Sufism is not confined to one particular religion or belief; it is, in essence, a spiritual practice connected to the human spirit in a universal sense, transcending any single faith or belief system. However, those who vilify Sufism, demean it, and consider it naivety and mysticism, attributing it to the backwardness of Muslims, only perceive humans as material entities and their tangible possessions. They operate within the confines of what they see, feel, and touch, lacking understanding of the religious and spiritual values and failing to explore the true essence of faith.

• *Sufism as Extraordinary Genius:*

Many philosophers and psychologists have regarded Sufism as a genuine religious genius, without bias. They were not Sufis themselves but rather theoretical philosophers and experimental psychologists who focused their studies on Sufi experiences as being beyond the realm of ordinary consciousness<sup>2</sup>. High consciousness cannot be compared to ordinary awareness in language, gesture, expression, thought, or direction. In this respect, we can refer to the writings of thinkers like Henri Bergson, William James, Eric Fromm, Evelyn Underhill, Tholuck, and others in the field of religious psychology to understand this religious genius in the works and symbolic expressions of Sufis<sup>3</sup>.

The excellent Sufi texts do not originate from ordinary consciousness at all. Were the texts of Al-Niffari, Ibn Arabi, Al-Sadr Al-Qunawi, Ibn Sab'een, or even the texts of Ibn 'Ata' Allah Al-Sakandari, Al-Nuri, and Al-Junayd before them, the product of ordinary consciousness? Whoever claims this is ignorant of Sufism, just as they are ignorant in writing about it or within it. They are unaware of its high aesthetic taste methodology, and therefore, they cannot appreciate the allusions made by the Sufis. Instead, they make random and baseless remarks that are not worthy of a response because they lack meaning.

The truth is that Sufism is indeed one of the best forms of spirituality. In the West, some prefer Sufism, and they may follow its path without even realizing it. So, if we were to ask, 'What attracted the West to Sufism? What attracted orientalist to research Sufism in general, and Islamic Sufism in particular?'

This question is of utmost importance. In the realm of Sufism, the profound and unified fulfillment of human spiritual needs is realized, encompassing dimensions such as breadth,

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<sup>2</sup> Abu Al-Wafa Al-Tafaazani. *Madaakhil Ila Al-Tasawwuf Al-Islami*. Cairo: Dar Al-Thaqafa, 1974, 45.

<sup>3</sup> Magdy Ibrahim. *Hadith Al-Wilayah: Ida'at Ma'arifayah Lil-Dua'im Wal-Martakazat*. Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyah, 1443 AH - 2022 CE, 14-15.

comprehensiveness, perfection, harmony, humanity, and the elevation of purposes. Regardless of an individual's basic concerns, a spiritual dimension exists within every human being, transcending materialistic matters. Interestingly, contemporary society appears overly preoccupied with material existence, often neglecting or entirely disregarding the spiritual aspect. Consequently, while making significant strides in material progress, scientific discoveries, cognitive advancements, and technological innovations, humanity has faltered in understanding its genuine human essence<sup>4</sup>. This failure extends to the realm of comprehending humanity itself, leading to moral decay, the erosion of aesthetic taste sensibilities, and the trivialization of existential questions.

As a result, what has drawn the attention of both Western scholars and orientalist to Sufism is the recognition of these shared and universal spiritual dimensions. The writings of figures like Ibn Arabi and Al-Hallaj resonate with Western scholars as deeply as they do with Easterners, if not more so. The human and spiritual aspects prevalent in Sufism, particularly the concept of the unity of religions and existence as articulated by Ibn Arabi, are profoundly thought-provoking and transcendent of superficial boundaries. It is essential to emphasize that these dimensions of the human and spiritual experience, often unique to Sufism, transcend distinctions between the Western and Eastern worlds. They warrant our utmost attention and care.

I reiterate that Sufism is not merely a theoretical pursuit in which a Sufi dissipates their life in endless debates and discussions. While intellectual engagement is essential, it is not the ultimate goal in itself. Even if one directs their intellectual efforts toward the writings of Sufi scholars, they cannot be considered a Sufi solely through extensive reading. True Sufism is characterized by a transformation of knowledge into continuous, genuine actions. It is when the knowledge acquired becomes a sustained, genuine practice that one can be deemed worthy of the title "Sufi."

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<sup>4</sup> Alexis Carrel. *The Unknown Man*. Translated by Shafiq Asad Fareed. Ma'arif Library, 1405 AH - 1985 CE, 23.

Conversely, a true Sufi does not disregard theoretical knowledge or intellectual orientation, which helps eliminate ignorance and prevents stagnation into mental complacency. Sufism, from this perspective, involves seeking knowledge alongside the purification of the soul. Purification requires insight to remove the veils that cloud one's inner self. Therefore, clear perception and enlightenment are necessary steps in the pursuit of Sufism.

If the ultimate goal is the closeness to God, and the journey is arduous, few endeavours are more challenging in both conceptualization and practice. This underscores that Sufism is not simply about reading or writing; it is a journey where the seeker refines their path through the realms of discernment, feeling, and insight. Along this journey, the seeker ascends toward the ultimate destination and then relinquishes it, being constantly with God without any attachment. This concept is reflected in the teachings of Imam Al-Junaid, who passed away in the year 297 AH, alluded to the essence of Sufism, emphasizing that in Sufism, the individual stands firm without any attachment<sup>5</sup>. A discerning Sufi firmly believes that God is the true actor behind every action. They do not place their trust in the good deeds they have performed, nor do they seek recompense for them. This is because they recognize that God's grace upon them surpasses any estimation. Therefore, their trust in God is of greater significance than their trust in themselves, whether it be in their actions or in their knowledge.

False and futile is the work that one assumes to be an invention of their own. Knowledge of God comes through illumination, revelation, and inspiration<sup>6</sup>. The Sufi says, "Look into your heart, for the kingdom of heaven and earth is within you." Continuous

<sup>5</sup> Abu Al-Qasim Al-Junaid. *Al-Sir Fi Anfasi Al-Sufiyah*. Edited by Magdy Ibrahim. Dar Al-Ma'arif Al-'Ilmiyyah, 1436 AH - 2015 CE, 22.

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Khaldun. *Shifaa Al-Saa'il Wa Tuhdheeb Al-Masa'il*. Edited by Muhammad Mati' Al-Hafidh. Dar Al-Fikr, 1996 CE, 59-65. Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah*. Edited by Ali Abd Al-Wahid Wafi. Nahda Misr, 1979 CE. Vol. 3, 1063.

introspection of the heart leads to inner spiritual struggle, which involves removing the veils from the heart, cleansing it from the acquired impurities and blemishes. One who truly knows themselves knows their Lord, as the heart is a mirror that reflects every divine attribute. Just as a mirror loses its ability to reflect images when rusted, the inner spiritual sense, which Sufis call the "eye of insight" or "the seeing eye," is obscured only when the veil of self-darkness (the ego) is completely removed. However, achieving pure clarity relies on God's grace and requires inner spiritual struggle on the part of the servant.

The day when the veils of insight are lifted, monotheism becomes a tangible reality for the Sufi through their spiritual efforts. It becomes a central pillar and fundamental anchor, leading to a state of perplexity. When the minds of the wise converge towards it, they converge towards a state of bewilderment, but this bewilderment is a bewilderment of knowledge, not ignorance<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, the reality of monotheism becomes the essence of knowledge. As Al-Junaid stated, it precedes kindness to the one recognized, in a specific and intimate manner, by a particular chosen servant. However, this knowledge is not for everyone but is "specific" to those who have been chosen. The knowledge of such realities cannot be comprehended by everyone due to its secretive nature. Revealing the secret of divinity, as they say, constitutes disbelief<sup>8</sup>.

## (2) Aesthetic Taste as a Sufi Epistemological Method

When we inquire about the methodology of reaching this knowledge, the answer lies in the purification of the heart and the secret path to attaining God's pleasure. It is through the method governed by the person, which is the method of aesthetic taste, feelings, and conscience, leading to God's satisfaction. It is here

<sup>7</sup> Ali Ibn Uthman Al-Hujwiri. *Kashf Al-Mahjub*. Translated by Mahmoud Ma'di Abu Al-Azayim. Dar Al-Turath, 1394 AH - 1974 CE, 305, 414.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Junaid, Abu Al-Qasim, Op. cit. 66-67.

that the intimate connection with God and nearness to Him become a blessed and elevated extension experienced by the heart of the knower. This spiritual life is one where comparisons cease to exist. The driving force that propels individuals toward this spiritual life is a psychological motive known as "Observant motive" or the motive of observation<sup>9</sup>.

It is narrated that Zan Al-Nun Al-Masri (died 245 AH), during his travels, heard of a righteous man living in Mount Muqattam. Upon receiving news of this man, Zan Al-Nun visited him to pay his respects and stayed with him for a period. When he decided to depart, he asked the righteous man to pray for him. The man responded, "May God make you feel close to Him." However, Zan Al-Nun did not settle for this single prayer; he sought more. The righteous man replied, "May God make him feel close to Him and give him four things without four: knowledge without seeking, wealth without money, honour without family, and intimacy without companionship." Then, he asked, "Is this not enough for you?" Zan Al-Nun wept and said, "Indeed, by God, it is enough and even more"<sup>10</sup>.

In pursuit of enlightening the heart with the light of God, dedicated individuals, the determined seekers of God's pleasure, strive to attain this intimate connection. They strive to live in the shadows of proximity to God. This is the essence of religious practice, and it is the ultimate goal, pursued with dedication and determination. Among the qualities of the knower, which form the foundation of faith, is a quality that, when realized, is built upon struggles and striving. The virtues of the knower, in their realization, are intertwined with their challenges and hardships, as the knower's noble qualities are directly connected to their ordeals and tribulations.

<sup>9</sup> Taur Andre. *Islamic Sufism*. Translated by Adnan Abbas Ali. Al-Jamal Publications, 2003, 62

<sup>10</sup> Abu Al-Hasan Ali Ibn Uthman Al-Sulami. *Tabaqat Al-Sufiyah*. Edited by Noor Al-Din Shariba. Al-Khanji Library, 1406 AH - 1986 CE, 132.

The Sufi sense (not the philosophical intuition) is the authentic essence in the sense perceived by the mystical knower, where they see no other meaning except the ultimate truth. This truth is continuously perceived as real, worthy of following, practicing, experiencing, and living. It is a constant presence and experience without interruption. In reference to Imam Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905), it is said: "Religious deeds are only produced by spiritual faculties and spiritual determinations because the spirit has the true authority that dominates the body in reality"<sup>11</sup>.

The meaning behind this statement is that when religious actions are merely rooted in bodily habits, they do not touch the soul in any way. Therefore, acts of worship often lack the spiritual realization mandated by their religious content and desired goal. There is no deed more righteous for acceptance than the one in which the soul takes charge and rejoices in. Thus, the actions of the hearts are superior to the actions of the limbs, and they are more enduring than those actions that are mere habits and do not yield the fruits of realizing higher spiritual stations.

### **(3) The element of value in human existence**

Sufism consistently reveals the "element of value in human existence," and it illuminates aspects and themes such as this "value," which researchers often overlook in areas outside of Sufism and its themes. Sufism is not pretension, sophistry, or mere assertion; rather, it is a pure spiritual life within the realm of values. If you wish, you can untangle the threads of the lives led by Sufis, one situation after another, ascending from one spiritual station to another. In each situation, there is life, and in each spiritual ascent, there is a unique inner revolution that sets the Sufi apart through the qualities of uniqueness, independence, and the rare spiritual

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<sup>11</sup> Magdy Ibrahim. "Mohammed Abdo: From the Rationalism of Leadership to the Wisdom of the Knowers." *Contemporary Thought Magazine*, Cairo: Egyptian General Book Authority, 2023.

freedom that only individuals of distinction, the elite, the heroes, and the noble possess.

Sufism is a distinctive approach to spiritual life and an organized movement in service of God. It emanates from unique individuals who have a method, a way, an ascent, and a spiritual journey. The will they possess is a value among the noble, eternal values. The perfection they seek is a value among the greatest, enduring values. Every virtue of human virtues, at its highest peaks, is a value from the values of Sufism, whether we recognize them or not, whether we comprehend their essence or not. However, as a whole, these virtues emerge from Sufis through recognition and refinement. Sufi taste (not philosophical intuition) is a high form of spiritual etiquette, and it is the dynamic element with "values" that govern the nature of the "Sufi experience" in its active course. The Sufi engages in it, free from the distractions of the path<sup>12</sup>.

This mystical etiquette is essentially a process of recognition and refinement. On one hand, it is the same refinement through which the "value's effectiveness" manifests itself to the extent that it fully reflects the perceptions of its possessor, including their awareness and spiritual capacities. On the other hand, it involves first recognition, followed by refinement. In this context, the Sufi perceives realities with a unique awareness, a comprehensive awareness that distinguishes them from others among those who perceive. If this mystical recognition is the sole means of achieving the refinement that the mystics seek as their ultimate goal, then it is undoubtedly the revealer of the value element.

However, when you look at the opposite side, you find that there is no recognition without refinement. Value is only perceived through this refinement. The process of refinement begins with a literary image conveyed to us by the poetic expressions of the Sufi and their delicate spiritual sentiment, characterized by a noble and

<sup>12</sup> Bertrand Russell. *Mysticism and Logic*. Selected Papers . New York: The Modern Library, 1927, 28-30.

strong faith. As we move up the ladder of perception, we see that this aesthetic recognition is precisely the authentic foundation of the Sufis' tastes. It is the essence of their aesthetics. As for the fruit, it is refinement. Here, by refinement, I mean that complete ethical system that is cohesive-a clear revelation of the value element, without any ambiguity. This ethical system is what is known through the signals of the Sufis and their aesthetic taste expressions.

#### **(4) Aesthetic Taste Recognition in Mystical Perception**

Since mysticism is the primary and ultimate attribute of the mystic, the literary imagery they understand is exactly the same as the literary imagery they perceive. When I say "perceive," I mean it precisely, emphasizing this perception. If we understand that perception here refers to this unique aesthetic taste perception, it serves as evidence and a sign of the perception of those who know. The intended perception here is aesthetic taste perception, something distinct from "knowledge."

In general terms, knowledge is one thing, and perception is another. However, for Sufis, there is a significant difference between knowledge and perception. When you know something, you may possess a superficial and surface-level understanding. Your knowledge is expressed through words that confirm this understanding. Some may have only a shallow understanding that barely goes beyond their lips. Here, the realm of knowledge is sufficient.

However, the realm of knowledge is not the realm of perception. This realm of perception requires an individual to immerse themselves in faith, to comprehend it through aesthetic taste, based on a spiritual experience shaped by the movement of experimentation<sup>13</sup>. In this experience, faith is firmly established in

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<sup>13</sup> Magdy Ibrahim. *Al-Tajrubah Al-Sufiyyah (Research on the Relationship between the Belief in Duality and the Vision of Unity in the Experience of the Spiritual Knower)*. Edited by Atef Al-Iraqi. Maktabat Al-Thaqafah Al-Diniyah, Cairo, 1st ed., 1423 AH - 2003 CE, pp. 100-103.

the hearts. Yet, it is this faith's firm establishment that depends on two fundamental forces: the first is a "preventive" force, and the second is a "propelling" force. Without these two forces, there is no place for faith to take root in hearts or for the enjoyment of its sweetness. If we neglect the effectiveness of the first "preventing" force or disconnect it from the effectiveness of the second "propelling" force, these two forces constitute the domains of perception of the perceiver of the act of faith. They are also active forces: one is preventive, preserving, and obstructive; and the other is productive and result-oriented. Its result lies in causing certainty, such as the deep-rooted faith previously mentioned.

#### **(5) Nurturing the Will**

The establishment of genuine faith in a righteous heart does not occur without activating these two forces. Both of them are positive and active forces, neither is negative as might be assumed, and both are positive in directing action, one in terms of prevention, and the other in terms of impulsion. Together, they work side by side, with each having its own leadership in decisions: the first decides the action of "prevention," and the second accomplishes the action of "propulsion."

The first force prevents the self from wrongdoing, which is an inherently positive action. Through it, one abstains from vices, evils, prohibitions, malice, thorns, and all that obstructs a person's path. The second force propels the self towards obedience and doing good deeds, also a positive action that grows, strengthens, and elevates. Through it, one adorns themselves with the best qualities of a righteous soul. The first force preserves the self and shields it from evil and sins, while the second drives it towards virtues and goodness. Along this path of propulsion, it flourishes and ascends in the journey of perception. When one reaches this noble level, they have solidified their faith without wavering or disturbance, acquiring a preventive power to keep the roots of faith firmly anchored in the hearts of believers.

It's not hidden that the interaction between these two forces, pulling and pushing, restraining and compelling, abstaining and adorning, gives rise to "the will" and nurtures it until it settles as a character trait in the aspiring soul. Imam Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, may God bless his soul, delved into this aspect of human nature and correctly identified the essence of "nurturing the will"<sup>14</sup>. He succinctly and precisely explained how it's done by saying: "Repeating the obedience of the commendable inclination and repeating the struggle against the blameworthy inclination".

This statement, in my estimation, is a miraculous gem of expression. For the self, as you can see, has two inclinations: one that calls for restraint and relinquishment, and the other that calls for impulse and adorning. The inclination that requires restraint and relinquishment is blameworthy, while the one calling for impulse and adorning is commendable. Both of them need "repetition" to establish the habit of resistance in the soul.

This repetition is of utmost importance. Repeating the obedience of the commendable inclination, which is a positive action, requires amplifying positive thinking about it and consistently acting upon it for it to become ingrained. As for repeating the struggle against the blameworthy inclination, it implies that one must eliminate this blameworthy inclination entirely and never return to it because it's a negative action. However, repeating the act of struggle itself is a positive force that is indispensable for "sharpening the powers of the soul and elevating it to the highest level possible, where it can have spiritual influence and be open to higher inspirations"<sup>15</sup>. If the struggler cannot eliminate their inclination all at once, they should break it down into smaller components, limit and reduce it gradually, until they can completely hide it from their consideration in preparation for its elimination.

Now we come to the excellent text of Al-Ghazali where he says in his book "*The Revival of Religious Sciences*":

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<sup>14</sup> Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali. *Ihya' 'Ulum Al-Din*. Dar Al-Ma'arif, Vol. 3, 66-67.

<sup>15</sup> Taur Andre. op. cit., 99-100.

When the inclination's foundation is based on knowledge, it is only strengthened through action in accordance with that inclination and consistency. Consistency in acting in line with the qualities of the heart flows like food and sustenance to those qualities. So, if someone has an inclination towards seeking knowledge or seeking leadership, for example, their inclination at the beginning may be weak. But if they follow the dictates of that inclination, engage in acquiring knowledge, and nurture leadership and the required actions for it, their inclination becomes more assured and entrenched, and it becomes difficult for them to deviate. However, if they go against the dictates of their inclination, their inclination weakens, breaks, and may even disappear<sup>16</sup>.

Here, Al-Ghazali establishes a fundamental truth ingrained in human nature and instinct. He first affirms that an inclination, when directed towards action, must be fortified by action and consistency. If the inclination is towards the commendable, then acting in accordance with it is a constant requirement. If the inclination is towards the blameworthy, then the dictates of the inclination require continuous effort in resisting the blameworthy.

It is needless to explain that this ongoing action in the first case and continuous struggle in the second case constitute what Al-Ghazali calls "consistency." Consistency in acting in line with the qualities of the heart is like a channel for nourishment and strength for those qualities. "Consistency" here means "repetition," and repetition serves to establish habits.

Al-Ghazali provided another example to illustrate the establishment of inclination through repetition, practice, habituation, and exercise, which is known as "dominion" or

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<sup>16</sup> Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali. op. cit.,66-67.

mastery. He talked about the person inclined towards seeking knowledge, the one who finds within themselves a natural inclination towards seeking knowledge and engaging in it. If they undertake the required actions for this, and they consistently adhere to them, this inclination becomes firmly rooted in their heart. The motivating force (the driving power) from their faculties leaves its effects on the heart and strengthens it. Thus, they become knowledgeable in accordance with their inclination's actions.

Al-Ghazali continued to elaborate passionately, providing a compelling example that anyone who has experienced it in real life can relate to, saying:

Rather, the one who looks at a beautiful face, for example, with a weak initial inclination, if they follow it, act in line with it, persist in looking at it, sitting with it, associating with it, and being in close proximity to it, their inclination becomes more assured until their choice is overruled. They cannot help but be drawn to it. However, if they initially deprive themselves and resist their inclination, it's like depriving oneself of sustenance and nourishment for this inclination (and let's note that this inclination is a heart's quality). This becomes a counterforce that weakens it... because there's a connection between the faculties and the heart, and each one influences the other. Yet, the heart is the primary and guiding principle, like a prince or a shepherd, while the faculties are like servants, subjects, and followers<sup>17</sup>.

Al-Ghazali's analysis is that of a knowledgeable man, an expert in dealing with profound ideas, especially in the fields of education and psychology. He analyzed those whose thoughts aligned with their lives, whose lives were imprinted with their

<sup>17</sup> Ibrahim, Magdy. "Sufism in the World of Islamic Knowledge." Interview by Al-Muthaqaf Electronic Newspaper, Nov. 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2022.

thoughts, and those who practically experienced meanings, with their refined taste inseparable from their experiences and life. He is a great Sufi who never separated knowledge from perception and passionately adopted the Sufi methodology necessary for understanding and studying Sufism through the lens of taste and insight, elevating it to its highest level in matters of the soul, actions, and refinement. These are the true goals of Sufism: reaching the divine reality through purification and ascension.

I do not believe that anyone has studied Sufism in Islam without delving into the lives of great Sufi figures, those who focused on the cultivation of willpower, including the prominent figure Abu Al-Qasim Al-Junayd Ibn Muhammad Al-Baghdadi, known as the "Peacock of the Scholars," who passed away in 297 AH. He represents pure Sunni Sufism.

In the book "*The Sufi Experience*"<sup>18</sup>, which was introduced by Dr. Atef Al-Iraqi, Professor of Islamic Philosophy at Cairo University in 2002, and dedicated to the pioneer of Sufism in the Arab world, Dr. Abu Al-Ala Afifi, the author studied the experiences of great Sufis according to traditional classifications: the experience of Al-Bistami (d. 261 AH) in union, the experience of Al-Hallaj (d. 309 AH) in annihilation, the experience of Al-Suhrawardi, who was martyred in 589 AH, in illumination, the experience of Ibn Arabi (d. 638 AH) in the unity of existence, and the experience of Ibn Sab'een (d. 669 AH) in absolute unity.

These were great and influential figures in Islamic Sufism who emphasized the development, refinement, and education of the willpower, following the Sufi taste. This is in addition to what we find among the early authors of Sufism, such as Al-Sarraj Al-Tusi, the author of the Book "*Flashes*," Abu Talib al-Makki, the author of "*Qut Al-Qulub*," Al-Kalabazhi, the author of "*The Doctrine of the Sufis*," Al-Qushayri, the author of "*The Epistle*", and many others.

<sup>18</sup> Magdy Ibrahim. *The Sufi Experience*. Cairo: Library of Religious Culture, 2002.

This affirms without a doubt that taste was the methodology adopted by Sufis of the past and should also be embraced in modern and contemporary studies. Whoever lacks discernment also lacks insight and cannot progress in Sufism with guidance and insight into their own affairs.

### **(6) Character and the Ethical Conduct of the Soul**

The refined Sufi character, which is shaped through experience, practice, and habitual behaviour, is, in reality, a form of cultivation that refines the soul and elevates it through the stages of education and refinement. It is the kind of conduct that distinguishes Sufis as they realize it as part of their inner journey of experience. Furthermore, it doesn't stop at the theoretical framework but rather complements theory with practice, exercising control over theory to the extent it exercises control over practice. Through this combination, an intuitive sense in the realms of ethics and knowledge emerges, one that is rarely accessible to those outside the Sufi tradition.

Divine knowledge and love, bestowed as gifts by God to His knowledgeable servants, are also considered a form of this conduct. The taste-driven gnosis, with its literary and cognitive subtleties, cannot be separated from the tastes, knowledge, and praises found in Sufi literature. In essence, if taste-driven gnosis is not the source of those tastes, knowledge, and praises, they lose their authenticity.

Here, we do not mean literature in the linguistic sense, as appreciated by linguists, whether it be poetry borrowed by poets or prose presented by the literati and scholars. Our focus turns to Sufi literature in its precise sense, considering it as a platform from which the *arif* (the knower) continually ascends, without interruption, towards higher levels of knowledge and conduct. Abu Al-Qasim Al-Qushayri (d. 465 AH), the author of "*Al-Risala Al-Qushayriyya*," quoted Abu Nasr Al-Sarraj Al-Tusi (d. 378 AH), the

author of "*Al-Luma' fi Al-Tasawwuf*"<sup>19</sup>, saying: People can be categorized into three classes in terms of conduct: As for the people of the worldly life, most of their conduct lies in eloquence, rhetoric, memorization of sciences, names of rulers, and the poetry of the Arabs. As for the people of religion, most of their conduct lies in nurturing souls, disciplining bodies, preserving boundaries, and abstaining from desires. As for those of special status (i.e., the saints and knowers of God), most of their conduct lies in purifying hearts, respecting secrets, honouring covenants, managing time, paying little attention to thoughts, and displaying good conduct in the presence of seekers during times of presence." Additionally, it is narrated that Sahl bin Abdullah Al-Tustari (d. 283 AH) said, "Whoever conquers his soul through conduct indeed worships Allah with sincerity"<sup>20</sup>.

In the context of this Sufi taste that is realized through experience and the overflowing of the richness of living, it has been said that the perfection of *adab* (virtuous manners) can only be attributed to the prophets, peace be upon them, and the truthful ones. The *adab* referred to here, as previously described, is an internal characteristic that arises from the nature of spiritual taste and is specific to the knower of God (*arif*). It is the refinement of the soul within the confines of virtuous conduct. As the great Sufi Zan-Nun Al-Misri (245 AH - 859 CE) said: "The *adab* of the knower (*arif*) is above all other *adab*, as his virtuous conduct disciplines his heart"<sup>21</sup>.

One of the Sufi teachings in this regard is that an *arif* once said: " God says: Those whom I have guided to adhere to My names and attributes, I have also guided them towards virtuous conduct (*adab*). As for those to whom I have revealed the true nature of My

<sup>19</sup> Abu Nasr Al-Sarraj Al-Tusi. *Al-Luma' Fi Al-Tasawwuf*. Edited by Abdul Halim Mahmoud and Taha Abd Al-Baqi Surur. Dar Al-Kutub Al-Hadithah, 1960, 308.

<sup>20</sup> Al-Qushayri. *Al-Risalat Al-Qushayriyya*, edited by Abdul Halim Mahmoud and Mahmoud bin Al-Sharif. Dar Al-Ma'arif, 2nd ed., 2013, Vol. 2, 448.

<sup>21</sup> Al-Qushayri. op. cit.,448.

essence, I have left them susceptible to corruption. The choice between adhering to virtuous conduct or succumbing to corruption is yours to make"<sup>22</sup>.

When we diligently explore the implications of this sign, we are compelled to acknowledge that the realization of the eternal self is an impossibility, as its attainment leads to corruption. In corruption, souls are damaged, and this soul damage implies the collapse of the conditions of virtuous conduct (adab). Instead, corruption and destruction take its place. When this destruction becomes a reality for the soul, it sets the stage for a strong inclination towards annihilation within the divine essence. With the presence of love, annihilation occurs, and within annihilation, there is a pronounced absence due to the deterioration of the senses and the destruction of souls, which consequently leads to the collapse of the conditions of virtuous conduct. Perhaps this meaning can be explained by the statement of Junaid (d. 297 AH) when he said, "When love is genuine, the conditions of virtuous conduct collapse"<sup>23</sup>. It is said that the collapse of the conditions of virtuous conduct here is more of an affectation than a reality, as the outward manifestation of virtuous conduct is indicative of one's inner virtuous conduct.

Considering the significant role of virtuous conduct in Sufism, the indications of Sufis about it carry both cognitive significance and ethical criteria. Sufis often discuss adab from various perspectives, and it holds a central place in their discourse. Virtuous conduct is a fundamental aspect of Sufi life, and every Sufi has something to say about it. Abu Hafs Al-Haddad (d. 260 AH) expressed this when he said, "Sufism is all about virtuous conduct. There is virtuous conduct for every time, for every situation, and for every station. Whoever adheres to the appropriate virtuous conduct for the moment reaches the highest degree of humanity, while one who neglects virtuous conduct is far from

<sup>22</sup> Abu Nasr Al-Sarraj Al-Tusi. op. cit., 356

<sup>23</sup> Al-Qushayri. op. cit., 447.

what they may assume is near and rejected in what they perceive as acceptance"<sup>24</sup>.

Abu Abdullah Ibn Khufayf (d. 371 AH) once said, "Ruwaim told me, 'O my son, make your actions profound, and your virtuous conduct precise.'" Some have said, "Adhere to virtuous conduct both outwardly and inwardly, for whoever exhibits poor conduct outwardly will be disciplined outwardly, and whoever exhibits poor conduct inwardly will be disciplined inwardly"<sup>25</sup>. Zan-Nun Al-Misri (d. 245 AH / 859 CE) said, "The conduct of the knower surpasses all other conduct because his virtuous conduct disciplines his

heart"<sup>26</sup>. Some Sufis emphasize the importance of adhering to virtuous conduct both in appearance and inwardly. They argue that one's behaviour should be consistent with their inner state, and any deviation from virtuous conduct, whether outwardly or inwardly, leads to undesirable consequences.

For this reason, conduct with God has become the refinement of the self, elevating it through a process of refinement within the stages of knowledge and monotheism. From the very beginning, the soul is on the path of conduct, cultivating itself with the finest qualities that souls can possess and striving to have a noble character proficient in the arts of interacting with God. By God's grace, it reaches God, and thus, it is not surprising that its arrival is marked by elevated conduct and pure divine wisdom.

This internal conduct is a focal point for determined souls, something they passionately pursue. When it is eventually expressed through words, signs, subtleties, and even profound philosophical theories within the realm of philosophical Sufism, it becomes evident how these souls express their inner selves, whether through poetry, prose, or symbolic gestures. The Sufis'

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<sup>24</sup> Ibrahim, Magdy. *Al-Tasawwuf Al-Sunni (The Sunni Sufism: The State of Annihilation between Al-Junaid and Al-Ghazali)*. Edited by Atef Al-Iraqi. Maktabat Al-Thaqafah Al-Diniyah, Cairo, 1st edition, 2000 CE, p. 143.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Qushayri. op. cit., 446.

<sup>26</sup> Al-Qushayri. op. cit., 449.

expressions are limitless, and their hidden meanings and insights know no bounds. The foundation of all this, as previously indicated, lies in the aesthetic taste of spiritual realization and the moral values recognized by the inner logic of religious consciousness among Sufis, without exception.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, perhaps someone would ask, what is the benefit of this discourse, and what is its purpose in an era that no longer recognizes even a hint of spiritual values and the ethics of mysticism? What is the point of writing about Sufism and its goals in an age where every aspect of life is measured by materialism, leading to intellectual decline and moral degradation? We find ourselves in a turbulent time where the balance between spiritual values and materialistic demands is disrupted. It is only natural and logical that there is a reaction, whether we want it or not, related to the values of the spirit, the vitality of conscience, and the ethics of mysticism.

We are living in an era where etiquette is disappearing, morals are declining, and injustice is blatant towards some nations and civilizations. Our search for etiquette yields nothing, and we only have the names of peace, love, compassion, and harmony, but their essence is lost. The freedoms advocated for are restricted, and the pens of great philosophers and thinkers are shackled or missing. Explicit values in confronting tyranny are twisted or stolen. There is no escape but to embark on a broad journey that expands and does not contract, towards these meanings and higher realizations. In Sufism in general, and in the lives of the saints and the knowers, this is the starting point. Is there not an opportunity for a meeting after a long absence?

Throughout the literature of Sufism, it becomes clear that the approach of aesthetic taste reflects the inner system of life experienced by Sufis. It also mirrors the language through which they express their insights, signs, and cognitive theories. The aesthetic taste approach is closely connected to the Sufi's personal experience and is directly linked to every aspect of their spiritual

life. It cannot be separated from either the broader picture or the finer details of their existence. This approach becomes the basis for addressing the major issues that Sufism revolves around, and no other approach is suitable for addressing them. If the aesthetic taste does not have a stable place in Sufism's notions, issues, and concerns, contemporary researchers have no urgent need to understand it or elaborate on it. It is a method recognized by the ancients in their signs and knowledge, and contemporary research should also acknowledge its uniqueness and adhere to its characteristics within Sufism. The aesthetic taste approach reveals the uniqueness of Sufism itself as the pinnacle of religion. The uniqueness of Sufism itself only requires this aesthetic taste approach. If mental or empirical scientific approaches were introduced into its subjects, we would promptly foresee a distortion of outcomes should researchers employ solely logical or scientific approaches while neglecting aesthetic taste and insight.

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