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Spiritual experiences of Islamic seekers

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Abstract

In this paper I intend to present a classified description of the experiences of the seekers who subscribe to the religion Islam bringing the essential characteristics of these experiences to the fore. The paper shall also explain an aspect of experiences through drawing insights from the philosophy of physics as it has developed in the past century. Since the use of the term seeker is treated here as an interchangeable with the term Sufi, the later shall be used throughout this discourse and the word experiences shall imply Mystic experiences.

Keywords: Sufi, Chisti, Islamic, mystic experiences

Prince Darashikoh has described experiences of two great Sufis of his time to whom he was spiritually affiliated. This description is contained in his celebrated book Sakinatul Auliya whose Urdu translation appeared from Delhi (1971).

Darashikoh mentions one Miyan Jeeyu and another Mulla Badakshi who were his spiritual masters and whose experiences included divining, spiritual healing, an overwhelming altruism, an effluent love and power for bringing the determinate order of causality to a state of collapse; a phenomenon that will be explained in this disclosure later on. They could create an atmosphere of ecstasy in their monastery and were capable of performing miracles. It is reported by Darashikoh that once a hunter killed a dove that was perched on the branch of a tree while Miyan Jeeyu had already warned him to refrain from such act. The Sufi was utterly dejected when the dove fell dead and he immediately sent one of his followers to bring the innocent creature to him. He took the bird in his hand and as he caressed it the bird came to life and flew away. However, the person who had killed was so obstinate that he again intended to kill it. But as soon as he pulled the catapult, he felt giddiness and severe pain because the stone in the catapult bounced back at him, and thereafter he himself fell dead on the spot.

Mulla Badakshi used to go into the state of pranayama for long hours and his followers also liked to practice pranayama. Mulla Bdakshi has warned his followers not to accept such words as Believer, Disbeliever, Hell, Heaven after the manner of orthodox fundamentalists whom he treated as ignorant of their real meanings. It may be apt to recall here that one of the greatest Sufi of Islam, namely Moulana Jalaluddin Rumi said in his 'Mathnavi' that "I have taken the kernel out of the Quran and left the bones to dogs." By saying thus, however, he never meant any disrespect to the Quran or any disparagement of the Holy Book. The Quran itself encourages us drawing our attention to the fact that those who are steeped in its meaning take the best out of it. In his book, 'Spirit of Islam' Syed Ameer Ali (1949) tells us: "The idea among the nobler minds in the world of Islam, that there is a deeper and more inward sense in the words of the Koran, arose not from the wish to escape from the rigor of "texts and dogmas" but from the profound conviction that those words mean more, not less, than the popular expounders supposed them to convey" (p.450). In fact, the emphasis on the esoteric component of religion has always been a source of confrontation between the Sufis and the Fundamentalists through the ages in the history of Islam, and the Sufis have always been insulted, tortured and even put to death by the Fundamentalists. As we already know, after his defeat at Samugarh, and his unsuccessful attempt to seek refuge in Afghanistan, Darashikoh was put to death by his brother Aurangzeb under the Fatwa issued by the fundamentalist judge. A similar situation exists today in the World of Islam. Sufism is banned in Saudi Arabia. It is thrived in few countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and in Iran.

In India we come across Sufis of the Chishti Order who have left a permanent mark on the minds of the people of different faiths. Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliyaand Baba Farid Ganjshakar stand as spiritual leaders of the Sufis of India. Instances of spiritual healing, and Effluent Self, giving unbounded love, positive attitude of acceptance of the people of different faiths, mathematically correct and precise forebodings, willful intervention in order of causality and thereby changing the course of

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events in the lives of people and a lifelong service to humanity are found in the biographical accounts of the Sufis of the Chishti order brought out by the late Professor Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, and around one hundred and ninety conversions held by Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya are compiled in his celebrated 'Fawaidul Fawad' telling us in abundance about the experiences as mentioned above. He had also taught us about the powers of Supermind which is capable of having a sense called 'Taur-E-Qusus' which seems akin to the idea of the Supermind given to us by Sri Aurobindo.

Nicholson (1970) has brought to us the translation of the one of the most celebrated Treatise on Sufism written by the Sufi writer Al-Hujwiri. We find biographical accounts of over seventy Sufis of Syria, Persia and Iraq experiencing presence of God, and having love, kindliness, compassion, forgiveness and altruism. We shall mention here some of those strange experiences that cannot be apprehended by reason and common sense. These experiences include willful intervention in the order of causality and death under Audition, i.e., on hearing certain words whose effects cause death which is probably desired by the Sufi.

Two things emerge quite clearly from the abovementioned reports. Sufis have been able to perform acts that bring the determinate order of causality to a state of collapse. We shall try to explain it more on the plane of science later on in this discourse. The other things pertain to the experiences of love and of ecstasy and rapture which can cause death. Death has not been an unwanted experience to Sufis who have generally preferred to meet it with gaiety. We learn more about the mystery of death through observation of Al Hujwiri which we are citing here at length.

Abu Bakr Muhammad B. Umar Al-Warraqwas a great Shaykh and ascetic. He is the author of books on rules of discipline and ethics. The Sufi Shaykhs have called him "The Instructor of the Saints" (muaddib al-awliyd). He narrates the following story: "Muhammad b. 'Ali handed to me some of his writings with the request that I should throw them into the Oxus. I had not the heart to do so, but placed them in my house and came to him and told him that I had carried out his order. He asked me what I had seen. In replied, "Nothing". He said, 'You have not obeyed me; return and throw them into the river'. I returned, doubting the promised sign, and cast them into the river. The waters parted and a chest appeared, with its lid open. As soon as the papers fell into it, the lid closed and waters joined against and the chest vanished. I went back to him and told him what had occurred. He answered, 'Now you have thrown them in'. I begged him to explain the mystery. He said: 'I composed a work on theology and mysticism which could hardly be comprehended by the intellect. My brother Khidr desired it of me, and God bade the waters bring it to him'. (p.142) (www.gutenberg.org)

"Concerning expressive love) (ishq) there is much controversy among the Shaykhs. Some Sufis hold that excessive love towards God is allowable, but that it does not proceed from God.The essence of God is attainable or perceptible, that man should be able to feel excessive love towards Him; but Man feels love (mahabhhat) towards God, because God, through his attributes and actions, is a gracious benefactor to His friends". (p.310)

Muhibb says: "The lovers of God have borne away the glory, of this world and the next, for the Prophet (PBUH) said, "A man is with the object of his love. Therefore, they are with God in both worlds, and those who are with God can do no wrong. The glory of this world is God's being with them, and the glory of the next world is their being with God. A lover delights in the affliction that his beloved makes him suffer, and having love he regards kindness and unkindness with the same indifference." (www.gutenberg.org)

"Junayd had a disciple who wants to be greatly agitated in audition, so that the other dervishes were distracted. They complained to Junayd, and he told the disciple that he would not associate with him if he displayed such agitation in future (www.gutenberg.org). "I watched that dervish", say Abu Muhammad Jurayi, "during audition: he kept his mouth shut and was silent until every pore in his body opened; then he lost consciousness, and remained in that state for a whole day. I know not whether his audition or his reverence for his spiritual director was more perfect." It is related that a man cried out during audition. He said his head on kids' knee, and when they looked, he was dead. I heard Shaykh Abi Muslim Faris b. Ghalib al-Farisi say that someone laid his hand on the head of a dervish who was agitated during audition and told him to sit down: he sat down and died on the spot. Raqqi relates that Darraj said: "while Ibn al-Quti and I were walking on the bank of Tigris between Basra and Ubulla, we came to a pavilion and saw a handsome man seated on the roof, and beside him a girl who was singing this verse:

'My love was bestowed on thee in the way of God;

Thou changest everyday: it would beseem thee better not to do this."

A young man with a jug and a patched frock was standing beneath the pavilion. He exclaimed: 'O damsel, for God's sake chant that verse again, for I have only a moment to live; let me hear it and die!' The girl repeated her song, whereupon the youth uttered acry and gave up his soul. The owner of the girl said to her, "Thou art free', and came down from the roof and busied himself with preparations for the young man's funeral. An eminent Shaykh relates that when he was walking in Baghdad with a dervish, he heard a singer chanting –

"If it be true, it is the best of all objects of desire,
And if not, we have lived a pleasant life in it."

The dervish uttered a cry and died. Abu Ali Rudbari says:

I saw a dervish listening attentively to the voice of a singer. I too inclined my ear, for I wished to know what he was chanting. The words, which he sang in mournful accentism were these:

'I humbly stretch my hand to him who gives good liberally.'

Then the dervish uttered a loud cry and fell.When he came near him, we found that he was dead. A certain man says: "I was walking on a mountain road with Ibrahim Khawwas. A sudden thrill of emotion seized my heart and I chanted –

'*All men are sure that I am in love,*
But they know not whom I love.
There is a man no beauty
That is not surpassed beauty by a beautiful voice.'

Ibrahim begged me to repeat the verses, and I did so. In sympathetic ecstasy (tawajud) he danced a few steps on the stony ground. I observed that his feet sank into the rock as though it were wax. Then hefell in a swoon. On coming to himself he said to me: 'I have been in Paradise, and you were unaware'. "I once saw with my own eyes a dervish walking in meditation among the mountains of Adharbayjan and rapidly singing to himself these verses, with many tears and moans:

"By God, sun never rose or set but thou wet my heart's desire and my dream.

And I never sat conversing with any people but thou wert the subject of my conversation in the midst of my comrades.

And I never mentioned thee in joy or sorrow but love for thee was mingled with my breath.

And I never resolves to drink water, when I was athirst but I saw an image of thee in the cup.

And I were able to come I would have visited thee, crawling on my face or walking on my head".

On hearing these verses, he changed countenance and sat down for a while, leaning his back against a crag, and gave up his soul" (p.410).

That fact is that if we can scan through the biographies of the Sufis we cannot escape the conclusion that at higher stages of spiritual advancement experiences well up from the hidden sources of human existence. There are also experiences of the Sufis that are comparable to what we find in the Biography of a Yogi. For example, some Sufi have been seen at two places at the same time. Such things go to break up the very structure of our intellect and they can never be explained so long we remain incapable of liberating our thoughts from the ambit of notions brought to us by classical Physics. We shall deal with it much at length later on.

Sir Mohammad Iqbal (1934) in his lectures on Islam tells us about the essence of the Sufis which represents the religious experience of Islam. He writes, "In the history of religious experience of Islam, which according to Prophet (PBUH), consists in the 'creation of Divine attributes in man,' this experience has found expression insuch phrases as – 'I am the creative truth' (Hallaj), 'I am time' (Muhammad), 'I am the speaking Quran' (Ali), 'Glory to me' (Ba Yazid). In the higher Sufism of Islam unitive experience is not the finite effacing its own identity by some sort of absorption into the Infinite Ego; it is rather the Infinite passing into the loving embrace of the finite. As Rumi says:"Divine knowledge is lost in the knowledge of the saint! And how is it possible for people to believe in such a thing?" (p.104)

Such utterances are possible only at farther reaches of human awareness. For a moment, therefore, we must turn to Sri Aurobindo (1986). The great seer tells us: "To get backto the essential fact of his freedom he must recover the sense of Oneness, the consciousness of Brahman and with the Lord. Recovering his freedom, realizing the oneness in all existences as becoming of the One Being who is also himself (So 'ham asmi, He am I) he is able to carry out divine actions in the world, no longer subject to the ignorance because free in knowledge." (p.62) He then says "This is the Lord, the purusha, the self-consistent Being. When we have this vision, there is the integral self-knowledge, the perfect seeing, expressed in the great cry of the Upanishad, So'ham. The Purusha there and there, He am. I." It is perhaps for this reason that Sri Aurobindo drew our attention to the view that Sufism repeats the

Upanishads in a different religious language.

In fact, the Sufi terminology is very vast, and its connotations stretch far beyond the language used by the Fundamentalists in Islam who generally abhor Sufi expressions. Hallaj was put to death for his utterances. Having acquainted ourself with the mode of experiencing reality common to all Sufis we may now turn to see how the character of such experiences can be understood.

The Characteristics of Mystic Experiences

Perhaps the most eloquent and systematic description of the mystic experiences is brought to us by William James (1958) in his well known book 'Varieties of Religious Experience'. He has mentioned four basic aspects of these experiences. 1. Ineffability, 2. Neotic quality, 3. Transiency, and 4. Passivity. Under each of these aspects James brings instances from the lives of persons who have been mystically-oriented. We believe that James draws quite close to Sri Aurobindo in admitting that "No account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness quite disregarded." (p.289) He is still more close to our great seer in giving expression to the idea of immortality. "With these come what may be called a sense of immortality, a consciousness of eternal life not a conviction that he shall have this, but the consciousness that he has it already". (p.306) Sri Aurobindo teaches us that "It is here, Ihaiva in this mortal life and body that immortality must be won, here in this lower Brahman and by this embodied soul that the Higher must be known and possessed." (p.163) It can therefore be safely stated here that the Sufis actually experienced Sachidananda. Their lives of piety, unselfish love and the purity of their thoughts expressed in their teachings all witness this fact.

Scanning the biographical accounts of Sufis and attending to the modes of their experience we come across things that are quite in explicable. They cannot be understood so long we are not prepared to accept an altogether different vision of reality which removes all limits set by Determinism. We can safely call it Scientific Mysticism.

Scientific Mysticism

Ernst Cassirer (1944) had once said, "Mysticism reveals to us , or rather would reveal to us, if we actually willed it, a marvelous prospect but we do not, and in most cases we could not, will it; we should collapse under the strain. Therefore, we remain with a mixed religion." (p.134) these words of Cassirer seem prophetic. Scientific Mysticism, as it is believed by the author of this discourse is bound to take us toward the Religion of Humanity as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo (1985); create a formidable counter-force against terrorism on the ideological and practical plane, and open up the channel for understanding the esoteric component of religion under an Integral-Holistic Vision of Reality. It wants us to bring peace in this world through the inner unification of humankind. We have therefore attempted to see how Scientific Mysticism can be understood in the context of the Philosophy of Physics as it has been advanced by Einstein, Max Planck, Neils Bohr, Werener Heisenberg and Sir Arthur Eddington.

One of the greatest Sufi Philosopher who can visualize anything like Scientific Mysticism Ibn al-Arabi of Spain who was treated as a heretic by the Islamic clerics but escaped being put to death. He has brought to us the celebrated principle of the 'The Unity Of All Being' which is examined by this author in the light of the Philosophy of Physics. This principle may also be called oneness of Existence.

The Unity of All Being

This principle tends to bring together those thought-current of the present day world that take us toward a unified vision of reality, and it goes to serve the life of humanity in aspects we have mentioned above.

This principle is the keynote of Sufi orientation of life in the fold of Islamic religion but it is abhorred and seriously disapproved by the fundamentalists.

At its fundamental level it is an integrating force tending to bring together what Northrop (1947) calls the "Aesthetic Component" of the Eastern culture and the "Theoretic Component" of the cultures of the West under the single set of meanings arrived at through a paradigm shift from the Classical Physics of Galelio, Newton and Dalton to the Field Physics of Maxwell and Faraday. How it is actually brought about has been fully explained by the present author in a Treatise on World Peace.

Since it is not possible to present it here in the short space of this paper, the author is providing Appendix I, II and III giving its full details because there is no other way at all for bringing it home to interested readers. We shall however present here the essence of this great principle but before that it is apt to mention that the Sufis who presently subscribe to it have their centres at Agra and Bareilly and generally, they owe their allegiance to Hazrat Mohammad Ali Shah who was also the recipient of the award from Ghalib Academy for his Sufi poetry. He is known as Maikash Akbarabadi and departed from this world many years back in 1991.

The experience of these existing Sufis whose ancestry is traced back to the time of the Mughal Emperor

Jahangir are unique and they range from the true dreams, spiritual healing, ecstasy under Sufi music, and a nearly unbelievable super intuitive knowledge to an equally unbelievable living interaction with Sri Krishna. Their unique poetry also represent Krishna Bhakti. Perhaps the most visible aspect of these Sufi of the Chishti Order is the experiences of divining and spiritual healing. Those who have interacted with these living Sufis report feelings of comfort, happiness and peace.

Hazrat Maikash Akbarabadi was an advocate of the Unit Of All Being Or Oneness Of Existence. In a nutshell, when stated in the language of science, it can be said that we humans live in an encompassing Unified Field Of Directive Energy holding the Determinate Order Of Causality in a paradoxical relationship with the Intermediate Order of Causality which was once envisaged by the great Immanuel Kant and which is derived from the notion of Causality advanced by Max Planck. Human consciousness is capable of coming into an Equation Of Consonance with the Intermediate Order under which it can acquire the power bring the events of the Determinate Order to a state of collapse that appear as freak of nature. What appears as chance in our experience of cause and effect can be apprehended as order under the action of consciousness upon pure duration.

The idea of Oneness of Existence is inalienable to this principle. Oneness of existence denotes life's inherent tendency for connectedness with its sources of existence that are inseparable aspects of reality. Man, therefore stands in an inseparable relationship with reality under four interpermeating Relational Patterns: 1. The Physical World; 2. The Other Self; 3. His Own Self; and 4. The Transcendental order of Causality. Human destiny unfolds itself from these sources of existence. These primary and irreducible patterns single out man's supreme and primary identity from all his secondary identities. The Sufi concept of the Whole Man arises out his connectedness with all aspects of reality but man is free to break away his relationship with any of them, in other words he can destroy any of these primary relational patterns. However, the prive which nature has set for his flagrant existential fault is the forfeiture of his supreme identity, his creativity, and the meaning of his life. Man may thus sink into lifeless existence.

The Sufi principle goes further, telling us that inner self or the heart (Qalb) is the centre of our being and also the centers of our connectedness with reality. Fuller Royal and Gregory Olson (1998) tell us that the inner self reminds the individual of his connectedness to everything in the universe (non-linear physics, quantum mechanics, wholeness) and encourages the conscious mind to seek unit (love) rather than separateness, in the soul's relationship with others" (p.26). Turning to Rom Landau (1956) we find that love has a crucial role in the Sufi perspective of existence. Ibn al-Arabi treats love as all pervasive holding together all beings. It is fundamentally one representing the essence of the Divine. Human heart is the abode of love. "Were it not for love. Love would not be worshipped"(p.62). In fact love is the keynote in the system of Sufi principle and in a sense, the goal of evaluation. In yet another sense it is the beginning and end of existence. The meaning of existence is amputated if love is taken out of it and hence it cannot be separated from connectedness. Ken Wilber (1995) affirms this position irrefutably.

Mystical experience, as the Sufi principle teaches us cannot be differentiated so far as God is experienced as Light and Love. Writers like William James, W.R. Inge, W.T. Stace. Evelyn Underhill, Rufus M. Jones and Rudolf Steiner affirm the position taken by the Sufi principle which we have brought out. The Indian writer Saral Jhingran (1982) tells us that "Ibn'l Arabi explains love as that which pervades all being and holds them together. However much it may differ in form, it is fundamentally one, for it represents God's Essence. Not only the soul is created in the image of God (or is an expression of an idea 'in' God's Logos), the love that binds the soul with God is itself God's Essence. This love brings the gulf between the creature and the creator". (p.154) "The universe according to Rumi (1999) is a realm of love. In comparison with love, law and reason are secondary phenomena. It is love that creates to fulfill itself and reason steps in later to look at it retrospectively, discovering laws and uniformities to seek the threads of unity in diversities of manifested life". (p.834)

Explaining Ibn-al-Arabi's position, the renowned Egyptian professor Affifi writes: "The ultimate goal of all mysticism is love; and ibn 'Arabi's mystical system in particular, it is the full realization of the union of the lover and the Beloved. Now, if we look deeply into the nature of worship, we find that love forms its very basis. To worship is to love in the extreme. No object is worshipped unless it is invested with some sort of love; for love is the divine principle which binds together and pervades all beings. This means that the highest manifestation in which God is worshipped is love. In other words, universal love and universal worship are two aspects of one and the same fact. The mystic who

sees God (the Beloved) in everything worships Him in everything. This is summed up in the following verse:

I swear by the reality of Love and Love is the cause of all love

Were it not for Love (residing) in the heart. Love (God) would not be worshipped".

Love is the greatest object of worship and it is the only thing that is worshipped for its own sake. Other things are worshipped through it.God as an object of worship, therefore, resides in the heart as the supreme object of love. He is not the efficient cause of the philosophers or the transcendent God of the Mu'tazilies. God is in the heart of His servant and is nearer to him than his jugular vein. "My heaven and my earth contain Me not". Says the prophetic tradition, "but I am contained in the heart of My servant who is a believer".

The writings of the great Al-Ghazali would give impression to any careful reader that he had experiences of intense love of God. His idea of soul seems to draw quite close to the idea of Sri Aurobindo (1986). "The human soul is one with the Lord", says Aurobindo, and then he proceeds to tell us that the Silent Brahman within must be recovered. Citing from Ghazali's famous writing Kimiya-l-Saadat Professor Saeed Sheikh (1999) has given us an authoritative account of Ghazali's mysticism, "not only are man's attributes" says Al-Ghazali" a reflection of God's attributes but the mode of existence of man's soul affords an insight into God's mode of existence". "He who knows himself knows his Lord". Like Sri Aurobindo, Al-Ghazali teaches us that man has infinite spiritual possibilities and the mind he experiences as thought and perception is not the essential element of soul. Soul can recover its completeness through going back to its self-existence. Both these great seers and thinkers want us to know Silent Purusha or the Amr.

Conclusion

Sufis had a very deep concern with the idea of sacredness of man and his life. Violation of this idea amounted to an outright violation of the Will of God. Consequently, the idea of human dignity was held supreme in their ethics. The present author believes that this idea as it is now advanced by Sri Aurobindo must be treated as a Universal Principle of Human Dignity and every effort should be made by implementing it at the National and International levels. It is believed by this author that Sufism brought up as Scientific Mysticism shall cut the roots of Terrorism originating under Fundamentalism in Islam, if a Union is created between the Sufis and the adherents of the Religion of Humanity as envisaged by Sri Aurobindo. Such a Union can create peace in this world and bring about the cherished inner unification of humankind transforming humanity into a Family of God.

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