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Transpersonal Dimensions in Islamic Spirituality

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The Sufi tradition that arose within Islam describes a compelling and varied map of the self and its transformations. Over the span of a millennium of practice and discourse, Sufis have explored and detailed the stages of the journey of self-transformation towards their ultimate aim of union with the One. Their models of the spiritual journey and of the emergent transpersonal self, extensively contextualized in phenomenology, epistemology, theology and ontology, offer singular insights into a richly detailed holistic psychology of self-realization and the making of the complete human.

Keywords: *Islamic mysticism, Ibn 'Arabi, Rumi, Sufism, Islam, Sufi transformation, Sufi psychology, transpersonal psychology*

*I*slam literally means “submission” and is understood as the conscious surrender of the individual to God’s will, and to be in harmony with God by aligning the individual will to the will of God (Fadiman & Frager, 1997, p. 3). The concept of submission is inherently transpersonal as it points to the interior experiential transformation of the self through a process of abandonment of self-interest, and of coming closer to God by an increasing awareness of the divine presence. The act of submitting means ultimately to submit or align oneself to one’s original nature (*fitra*), which is the essential nature given to each individual by God in pre-eternity.

The Prophet Muhammad, as the carrier of this wisdom, is the archetype of human perfection and Muslims aspire to emulate his personage by their actions, morality and even personal character traits. The Qur’an is the miracle of Islam, and Muhammad its embodiment; the Qur’anic event thus serves as the matrix of mystical experience (Ernst, 2011, p. 32). Just as Christianity can be said to be embodied in Christ, Islam is “embooked” in the Qur’an. Coupled with the Traditions of the Prophet (*hadith*), which are a compilation of his sayings during his lifetime, these works form the foundation for the religion of Islam.

The transformative process of “becoming” a fully individuated human being is richly illustrated in the teachings of Sufism, often described as the

mystical dimension of Islam. While the teachings of the Qur’an and Hadith of the Prophet contain many direct allusions to a transpersonal dimension in Islam, the Sufis in particular have spent over a thousand years both applying and recording their investigations of this immensely deep and diverse tradition, and their hermeneutics have resulted in a nuanced and refined understanding of the transpersonal and existential dimension of Islam. Referring thus to the teachings and practices of Sufism immensely assists a dialog between Islam and transpersonal psychology, and indeed such a dialog would be impoverished without it.

Religion is never monolithic in its expression and institutions, and Islam is no exception. Cultural differences have shaped the way it is practiced, and even among the Sufi orders many significant differences are found in orientation, practice, and tolerance for interpretation of the religion. This is not surprising, given Islam’s long history and the immense variety of cultures that adopted it. For some in mainstream orthodox Islam, for example the fundamentalist Wahabbis, Sufism has been considered inimical to Islam (Malik, 2006, p. 9; Ernst, 2011, p. 213) and indeed even heretical. Some Sufis are known for expressive practices that involve movement, music, and song, as in the practice of many Sufi orders known as *dhikr* (remembrance), of which the most recognizably famous expression in the West is the Turning of the

“whirling dervishes” of the Mevlevi Sufi order. Some conservative cultures have branded their form of Islam with prohibitions against this kind of behavior which is considered sinful, while other cultures have adopted a more accommodating form of Islam that allows for such expression. The Ottoman Turkish culture, for example, was tolerant towards the Sufis, and Sufi orders such as the Mevlevi and Bektashi flourished under their rule. Several Sultans even had famous Sufis as their personal teachers and advisors (Toussulis, 2010). The great 13th century Sufi Ibn ‘Arabi acted as advisor to various kings and rulers in several different countries during his extensive travels (Addas, 1993).

Sufism and the West

While acknowledging that not all of Islam accepts Sufism as a legitimate way within the religion, Sufism was nevertheless a significant development within the Islamic tradition starting in the 9th century, and by any measure can be called a mystical or transpersonal dimension within Islam. It flourished in every part of the Islamic civilization and continues to be a force in the present day, both in the Islamic world as well as in the West where it has taken on several forms, some of which have elicited controversy following inevitable adaptations as the formal institutions of Sufism have encountered a more secular Western mindset.

Sufis are diverse in their approaches. One group, the Traditionalists, hold that Sufism emerged within the context of Islam, and to de-contextualize it from its origins is therefore misleading and impermissible. In other words, one cannot be a Sufi without first being a practicing Muslim, in the same way that the kernel cannot be taken separately from the husk since the husk provides structure and support for the kernel. No legitimate Sufi can call themselves as such without being a Muslim and living an ethical life according to the teachings of Islam and following all its precepts. Several prominent scholars such as S. H. Nasr, Frithjof Schuon, and Rene Guenon held this position.

On the other side of the argument are the Universalists, who hold that Sufism represents the universal message found in all the religions of the world, and thus in a certain manner transcends Islam, while having sprung from within it. Hazrat

Inayat Khan and his son Pir Vilayat Khan were notable proponents of this view, as are many who hold the Perennialist position that the mystical core of all traditions is the same, while affirming the differences between religion as necessary for people of differing cultures and temperaments (Toussulis, 2010, p. 10; Webb, 2006, p. 88). Coleman Barks, a contemporary interpreter of Rumi and largely responsible for the immense popularity of Rumi’s teaching on love, is a prime example of someone continuing in the tradition of drawing attention to the universal message of Sufism outside of its cultural and religious context (Hermansen, 2006, p. 46, n. 30).

Other influential transmitters of the Sufi wisdom include G. I. Gurdjieff and Idries Shah, who suggested an occult or hidden wisdom that derived from a common source, and who attempted to bring the practices of the Sufis to a Western audience. While Shah’s work and lineage has come under much scrutiny (Schimmel, 1975, p. 9; Toussulis, 2010, pp. 44–69) and is considered by some to have created an occultation of the way by appealing to a “hidden hierarchy” and of reducing Sufism to a psychological training system, he is nevertheless responsible for bringing to the West the dervish stories that are popular learning tools for transformation (Hermansen, 2006, p. 28, Toussulis, 2010).

Yet another movement within Sufism is that of the Malamiyya, or “the People of Blame,” who stood somewhat outside the hierarchy of Islam and even the Sufi orders, forming as it were a kind of “supra-order,” and who offered a more nuanced view of Islam (Holbrook, 1991; Toussulis, 2010). These are the Sufis who hide their spiritual accomplishments and are indistinguishable from ordinary people, yet “they are free and devoted servants of their Lord, seeing Him always in their eating and drinking, their waking and sleeping, and their speaking with Him among the people.” These are the people of blame, the highest of men “who have achieved the station of chivalry and good character with God, and not with any other” (Chittick, 1989, pp. 373–375).

The Law and the Way

As already noted, the Sufis themselves disagree on the prerequisites for being a Sufi; the

discourse is not limited to a perceived clash with Western civilization. For most Sufis, however, the overarching framework for understanding human development lies in a holistic formulation of the way to union with God as a tripartite way consisting of *shari'ah* (law), *tariqa* (way) and *haqiqah* (truth). Some later commentators added a fourth stage, that of *ma'rifah* (gnosis) to express the experiential aspect of becoming a verifier of truth (*muhaqiq*) on the spiritual path. Some place *ma'rifah* before *haqiqah* and others, such as Ibn 'Arabi, put *ma'rifah* after *haqiqah*; the key point in any case is to emphasize the direct knowledge or gnosis that arises from the unitive state, rather than an objective epistemology which is more akin to knowledge of the sciences. Traditional interpretations consider progress as linear steps through these stages: adherence to the law of Islam as a foundational prerequisite, followed by traveling the way of inner transformational work in which the wayfarer traverses the various *maqam* (stages) of development, until reaching the goal of union in truth (*tawhid*) (Fadiman & Frager, 1997, pp. 9–13).

According to a *hadith* the Prophet said that “the *shari'ah* are my words, the *tariqa* are my actions, and the *haqiqah* is my interior states” (Schimmel, 1997, p. 99). The stages can therefore also be considered mutually interdependent rather than a linear progression, and reflect an integration of the three aspects of human life into an integral and holistic model.

The meaning of *shari'ah* is literally that of the “broad way,” and is meant to be inclusive rather than restrictive. Legalist interpretations of the divine Law (*fiqh*) may restrict the spirit of the *shari'ah* in ways that may not have been originally intended. As Ibn 'Arabi wrote, “The *fuqaha* (legalists) of our times have restricted and forbidden, for those who follow them, what the Sacred Law has widened for them... that is one of the gravest calamities and one of the heaviest constraints in the matter of religion... The Law has affirmed the validity of the status of him who makes a personal effort to interpret for himself or for those who follow him” (Chodkiewicz, 1993a, p. 56). An important, if seemingly confounding point, is found in the school of Ibn 'Arabi that the Law cannot be completely understood until *after*

a Sufi has realized his or her oneness with God, which is not to say that a Sufi ignores the Law, but interiorizes and integrates the Qur'an completely in their interior by verification (*tahqiq*) and not by imitation (Toussulis, 2010, p. 187, Ballanfat, 2005, p. 24). As the Sufi Uftade said, “To act in true conformity to the exterior sciences is only possible after having reached the knowledge of the four degrees (law, path, knowledge, reality)” (Ballanfat, 2005, p. 24). Ibn 'Arabi's view is decidedly non-dualistic, and his non-linear approach offers a broad understanding of personal transformation on the spiritual path that is the same time rigorous, open, flexible, and tolerant towards diversity.

Muslim theologians speak of two commands, one that cannot be disobeyed, and one that can. The order that cannot be disobeyed is the Existentiating Command (*al-amr al-takwini*) “Be” (*kun*), the creative act of the Real that brings into being (*wujud*) all existent things: “His only command when He desires a thing is to say to it ‘Be!’ and it is” (Qur'an 36:82). This act is the bestowal of being (*wujud*) of each individual's original nature (*fitra*), brought into the manifest world. The order that can be disobeyed is the Prescriptive Command (*al-amr al-taklifi*), or the Law that is set forth by the religion. While submission to the Law may be advisable, and non-acceptance considered a “sin,” disobedience to the Prescriptive Command is ultimately the choice of the individual and an act of free will, while disobedience to the Existentiating Command is impossible and can never be sinful. Individual choices will always be made in accordance to the uniqueness of each person's predisposition (*isti'dad*) to receive guidance or misguidance, consequently adherence to the Law may prevent chastisement and distance from God, though chastisement will eventually turn sweet (Affifi, 1965, p. 162; Chittick, 1994, pp. 141–144), as all beings return ultimately to their source.

Sufis speak of the journey to union (*tawhid*) as a conscious journey to the place of *Alast* (“am I not your Lord?”) which represents the primordial covenant of God in the pre-eternal moment where they emerge into existence after accepting their original nature upon hearing the Existentiating Command “Be!” (Ernst, 1997, pp. 43–44).

Ibn 'Arabi declared that even though prophecy has come to an end with Muhammad's prophethood, General Prophecy (*nubuwwa amma*) is a property associated with individuals of very high spiritual attainment (*afrad*), which allows for the possibility of ongoing interpretation and expansion of the Law by these individuals who achieve such levels of realization (Chodkiewicz, 1993b, pp. 51, 137). Suffice to say that a detailed discussion of the Law is a complex one; the aim of this short outline is to summarize some of the main points of contention as they affect the legitimacy of the claims of Traditionalists and Universalists within the Sufi tradition.

The Sufi path of transformation:

Fana and Baqa

The Sufi path of transformation can be described as a phenomenology of annihilation, wherein the seeker experiences various degrees of *fana*, or "passing away," followed by an experience of *baqa*, or "remaining." What passes away is illusion and ignorance, and what remains is the perception of the Real; the concept or belief of a separate self is annihilated and the seeker takes on the attributes of God, which is the only Self that is real. This process is described as a dropping away of false beliefs and a return to one's original nature (*fitra*); it is not considered in any way a gaining or enlargement of self, but the shedding of illusion in an experience that is described in various ways.

Fana is certainly a human experience, but the individual is ultimately not the subject of the experience—the subject is Reality itself (Schimmel, 1975, p. 143). According to a common formulation of the Sufis of the "Oneness of Being" (*wahdat al-wujud*), the existence of all things is the existence of God in the form of that thing; therefore the identity of the subject always refers back to a single Subject. As the seeker sheds more and more of their separate sense of self, they become more absorbed in the divine presence, and eventually ignorance is replaced by knowledge of certitude. *Fana* and *baqa* are complementary aspects of the same experience in which the phenomenal world passes away, and the Real is seen to persist (Affifi, 1964, p. 146).

As the seeker approaches the divine presence, their journey may be described as a

broad series of three annihilations resulting in ever-increasing certitude of the Real. First comes the knowledge of certitude (*ilm al-yaqin*) in which the seeker becomes grounded in the knowledge that all that is, is the One Real Being. Next comes the vision of certitude (*ayn al-yaqin*) where knowledge of the Real is replaced by actual vision of the Real. Finally comes the reality of certitude (*haqq al-yaqin*), which is the complete mystical absorption of the Sufi in the presence of the Real (Schimmel, 1975, p. 142). The metaphor of heroism is helpful in understanding this progression—it is one thing to know about heroism, but another thing to actually see a heroic act, and yet another thing to become a hero oneself (Bursevi, 1981).

The Self

Fana results in profound shifts of identity, and the degrees of *fana* may also be mapped to the degrees of the evolution of self. In the Islamic tradition, the self is very much posited as an ontological entity, in contradistinction to non-egological systems such as Buddhism, requiring a transformation of the understanding of the self and leading to a true non-dual realization (Louchakova & Merlin, 2007a, p. 123). The *nafs* (a word containing the multiple meanings of soul, self, breath) is understood to persist at different levels, from the gross animal self to the refined spiritual self. The tendencies of the lower *nafs* are to be brought under control in order for increasing levels of integration to be achieved, but the aim is not the annihilation or passing away of the *existence* of the self in order to achieve a transformation of understanding, it is simply a re-orientation of identity—the self now sees according to a new order of witnessing, granted by the state or station that bestows the fresh perspective. As Balyani said succinctly: "If you know yourself without existing and passing away, then you know God, and if not, then not" (Twinch, 2011, p. 21).

In the Islamic tradition of human perfectibility, there is no elimination of the self at any level. The aim is always to bring the different parts of the self into their proper place and to achieve harmony between them, which requires the self or soul to be in submission (*islam*) to a higher order. The constituent parts of the human are brought together after the final *fana* into an ordered collectivity called *jam* (unification, collectedness) (Schimmel, 1975, p. 143).

The Sufi paradigm for self-knowledge is grounded in a Hadith of the Prophet and has formed the basis for many Sufi commentaries. According to this hadith, “Whosoever knows their self knows their Lord,” knowing the self is at the core of any process of spiritual evolution since the self is considered a unique face of the divine self-disclosure—every person and every thing in the cosmos is the Real’s diversity of faces by which it knows Itself. If the self is a facet or individuation of the Real, then by knowing one’s self one knows God.

At the core of an understanding of the self are the Qur’anic references to three levels of the development of the self or soul. Perfecting the self requires effort and determination to bring about the transformation of the self, but it is also made very clear that any progress is a result ultimately of grace. The first and lowest level of the soul referred to in the Qur’an is the “self which incites to evil” (*al-nafs al-ammara*; Qur’an 12:53) also referred to as the base ego, the carnal self or the “commanding” self; this self dominates through animalistic and selfish tendencies. The second level is “the blaming self” (*al-nafs al-lawwama*; Qur’an 75:2) in which the individual becomes aware of their weaknesses and shortcomings and they “blame” themselves as they begin to work on their deficiencies, not unlike the action of conscience. The final stage is the self at the level of perfection, “the tranquil self” or “the self at peace” (*al-nafs al-mutma’inna*; Qur’an 89:27).

Sufis have, in the figure of Muhammad, an archetype for their model of a complete and realized human being. As the messenger of God and the bringer of the Qur’an, he is an object of special veneration for Muslims. His personal character is considered worthy of imitation, and Sufis consider him a prototype of the universe as well as of the human form. As conceived by Ibn ‘Arabi, the prototypical Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*) is Muhammad who is the complete and total theophany of the cosmos through the Divine Names, and is the one in whom God witnesses His own being. This logic principle of the Reality of Muhammad is embedded in the cosmos and within each human individuation and represents each person’s potential to realize their perfection in accordance their particular lord (*rabb*) that

determines their uniqueness (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 272–273). When a person becomes Perfect Human, he or she achieves sainthood and becomes the special friend of God (*wali*, a term meaning both saint and friend). The *wali* is annihilated to their egoic self, and God is present in his or her witnessing of the Real (Ernst, 2011, pp. 58–60).

This concept of the perfectibility of each person establishes a clear context for understanding what is meant by progress in the Sufi path: perfection is the realization of union (*tawhid*) and identical to the self-disclosure of the One in Its appearances as human beings. Muhammad as logos represents the cosmic order and is the template upon which all humans are based, and is the ideal form to which they aspire.

Stages of development

The progress of the self is envisaged as a series of developmental stages, each one building on the completion of the preceding stage, until the final liberation of the soul with its annihilation in the divine identity. The seeker starts at the gross level, working their way through intermediate levels to a final level of complete identification with the One Self, also known as *tawhid* (union). The three levels of the self found in the Qur’an serve as a basis for a variety of models in which the path is envisioned as a ladder or staircase on which the seeker ascends, climbing towards higher levels of integration. The number of levels is well defined and is understood to represent an inherent and rational internal order, although as noted there can be some variation. While the structure may follow a specified order, the sequence of each individual’s traversing the stages is not always clear as this may depend on the ability of the adept, or it may be that God’s activity can grant a state or station without the seeker’s aspirations (Schimmel, 1975, p. 100, 105). What is clear is that each stage of development is considered a stable *maqam* (station), a completion of a level of inner work that is the actualization of a human potentiality and ultimately the result of effort on the part of the aspirant (Chittick, 1989, pp. 278–280; Schimmel, 1975, p. 99). Regardless of the model or number of classifications the developmental structure remains the same: an ascending ladder of spiritual perfections that a person must climb (Chittick, 1983, p. 12).

A more detailed seven-stage structure can be outlined as follows, typically accepted in many Sufi traditions. The *Commanding Self*, or the animal self or domineering self that commands to evil; the *Regretful Self*, where the beginnings of change emerge, and regret and desire for change grow; the *Inspired Self*, entailing the beginning of real practice and enjoyment of living a spiritual life, while continuing to work on the desires of the ego; emotionally mature and respectable; the *Contented Self*, or the self predisposed to be liberal, grateful, trusting and adoring; the *Pleased Self*, pleased in that everything is seen as given by God, including difficulties; the *Self Pleasing to God*, a highly integrated level where all power to act is seen as coming from God, accompanied with a healing of the multiplicity within; and finally, the *Pure Self*, which is complete annihilation in God, with no separation of self whatsoever (Fadiman & Frager, 1997).

A seven-stage model based on the phenomenological experience of *fana* and described as a series of annihilations is suggested in the work of Ibn 'Arabi. *Passing away from sin*, a realization that all actions are right (not in a moral sense but as coming from God) and that which is sin, is to regard one's actions as coming from oneself; *passing away from all actions* in the realization that God is the agent of all actions; *passing away from all attributes* of the "form" in the realization that they all belong to God; as Ibn 'Arabi put it: "God sees Himself in you through your own eye and, therefore, He really sees Himself: this is the meaning of the passing away of attributes" (Affifi, 1964, p. 144); *Passing away from one's own personality* in the realization of the non-existence of the phenomenal self, and the endurance (*baqa*) of the eternal substance which is its essence; *Passing away from the whole world* in the realization of the real aspect which is the ground of the phenomenal; *Passing away from all that is other than God*, even from the act of passing away (*fana al-fana*), in which the mystic ceases to be conscious of himself as contemplator, God being both the contemplator and the object of the contemplation; *Passing away from all Divine attributes*, in which the universe ceases to be the "effect of a cause" and becomes a "Reality in appearance" (*haqq fi zuhur*)—this seventh stage

represents the fullest realization of the oneness of all things, and must be the final aim of all mystical endeavor (Affifi, 1964, pp. 143–145).

These structures and their sequences are reflective of stage models described by contemporary integral theorists such as Ken Wilber as a prerequisite for psychological maturation. No one stage can be skipped, and all stages must be completed in a particular order (Wilber, 2006, p. 76). Structures lower down on the ladder model must be completed and integrated before moving on to the next level, otherwise cognitive and spiritual progress is not possible. While stage models are widely accepted as indices for developmental maturity within transpersonal psychology, some have argued caution against strict stage models lest they be judged deterministic or causal; one cannot say that effort or practice causes a new level nor can one say that it causes internal transformation of the self, since the transpersonal self has never been absent (Todres, 2000, pp. 227–237). There is no accumulation of states or stages of consciousness, nor does a transpersonal self somehow emerge from this process (Louchakova & Lucas, 2007, p. 126; Yiangou, 2011, pp. 104–106). The transformation is one of perception, not of being; a belief or delusion passes away, and what remains is the Real. The stage structures may have a particular order, but one may shift between and among them according to one's state, the effects of circumstances and the workings of God's grace (*baraqa*).

One of the most influential of the Sufis, Ibn 'Arabi's teaching has been encapsulated in the expression Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), an approach that declares the already existent union with one's true nature and does not allow for the possibility of a self separated from its source. Ibn 'Arabi's model makes different assumptions about the ontological status of the self, therefore his starting and ending points are different. For Ibn 'Arabi, real education of the self begins *after* union with the Real, and the aim of any path or practice is to reach union as quickly as possible in order for true individuation to take place. This is possible because individuals are already one with their source. Cognitively speaking, this is a significant concept in that it defines the starting point of any journey of

transformation: "If a person, without understanding whence he comes and whither he is returning, joins the journey, he occupies himself with motion and belonging, and if he finds the point of the beginning, he yet remains very far from finding the Universe of Joining-up (*jam*)" (Bursevi, 1981, p. 21).

Following Wilber's assertion that meditation practice alone is insufficient to move the seeker up the developmental ladder unless the practitioner is cognitively active in developing a wider View that can accommodate multiple viewpoints (Wilber, 2006, pp.105–108), one finds in Ibn 'Arabi a similar integral approach which declares that what keeps a seeker from realizing their goal is in fact their own limiting beliefs. Only when all beliefs or views can be accommodated is it possible for the goal to be reached. Wilber has said that "cognitive development is the increase in the number of others with whom you can identify and an increase in the number of perspectives you can take" (Wilber, 2006, p. 113), and that this is an essential component to spiritual development, while Ibn 'Arabi referred to a Station of No Station which is the ultimate integration of all views (Chittick, 1994; Yiangou, 2011). Cognitive transformation is therefore a key component to spiritual development, and can be tied to the kinds of structural changes in consciousness arising from the experience of *fana*.

Ibn 'Arabi described three lifecycles or journeys: descent, ascent, and return. Within the journeys many stages are possible but not elucidated here; what is suggested is a way of journeying that explicitly avoids any subtle dualism by contextualizing journeying within an ontological Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*). *Descent* is the journey from the divine essence where each person has a real place, through the levels of being from the intellectual to the imaginal to the corporeal worlds, until he or she is lodged with humankind. Difficulties may be encountered in this descent to the world and to the body. Without understanding one's origins, the destination will remain a distant goal. *Ascent* is the journey back to the source, which is the conscious re-integration into the primordial state. On this journey the person must lose the colors acquired on their descent, which are distractions and useless characteristics. "One

must hang on to a source of knowledge because it is necessary to fly to the Complete Intellect, which is also called the Reality of Muhammad and the degree of Sainthood" (Bursevi, 1981, p. 21). *Return* is the journey of real individuation, in which the person separates from union and returns to the world. There is a complete annihilation (*fana*), and a new consciousness of remaining (*baqa*) begins.

This journey starts from Him, but at the same time it is the station of remaining (*baqa*) with Him. It is the journey from the Reality to the Many. Having found the Universe of Oneness, he passes into the state of separateness. The man on this journey is for helping others to know, for clearing a way for others with a spiritual descent, and he puts on the cloak of personhood and comes down from his state to be among the people. (Bursevi, 1981, p. 23)

Love holds a particularly important place in Sufism, and is the ultimate transformative force, as expressed in the famous Divine Saying, "I was a hidden treasure; I loved to be known, so I created the world that I might be known," which exposes the underpinnings of all creative activity. In a famous poem Ibn 'Arabi declared "I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith" (Nicholson, 1978). One of the most famous of the Divine Sayings of the Prophet alludes to the efficacy of love as a transformative power, clearly indicating the role of divine action through love. It is also considered a charter for the mystical experience of union through love:

My servant does not cease to approach Me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks. (Ernst 2011, p. 51)

States and Stations

Sufis make a clear distinction between state (*hal*) and station (*maqam*). States are experiences, which may or may not come to a seeker, and are fleeting and impermanent. Stations are degrees of realization, and are the necessary foundation for actualizing human potential. A way to distinguish

between the two is that states are divine “bestowals” while the stations are divine “earnings” (Chittick, 1989, pp. 222, 278). Knowledge acquired through tasting (*dhawq*), for example, is a divine bestowal. It is usually considered inappropriate to pursue states. Stations, on the other hand, are associated with more permanent attitudes or evolutionary developments of the individuation’s path of transformation.

The Wilber-Combs Lattice is a bold example of a contemporary attempt to map states to stations (Wilber, 2007, pp. 88–93). States are understood to be present at virtually all stages of development, but will be interpreted according to the cognitive filter of the structure-state that the seeker is at. Stage development forms the cognitive basis whereby all experience is determined.

Ultimately the aim of the Sufi is to complete their full potential as Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*). The highest degree of perfection is called the Station of No Station, which is the highest station of all, as this station encompasses all possible stations (Chittick, 1994, p. 154). Some assert that none but Muhammad can attain that final station, and that for us getting closer is enough; for Ibn ‘Arabi, however, this station is attainable by those special friends of God known as the *afrad* (singular ones), who are the highest among the *malamiyya* (Chodkiewicz, 1993b), as this quote by Ibn ‘Arabi illustrates:

The People of Unveiling have been given an all-inclusive overview of all religions, creeds, sects, and doctrines concerning God. They are not ignorant of any of these. Adherents follow creeds, sects conform to specific laws, and doctrines are held concerning God or something in the engendered universe. Some of these contradict, some diverge, and some are similar. In every case the Possessor of Unveiling knows from where the doctrine, the creed or the sect is taken, and he ascribes it to its place. (Chittick, 1994, p. 154).

The Diverse ways of Transformation

While the legitimacy of Sufi teachers is validated by tracing their lineage through a direct chain of initiation (*silsila*) reaching back to the founder of the order and to the Prophet himself and which therefore makes possible mystical transmission and the entry of the individual into the spiritual life (Ernst, 1997, pp.

121–122), other forms of spiritual transmission and transformation have been extensively documented. The history of Sufism shows that initiation through nonliving teachers or inner spiritual guides was an accepted part of its discourse.

This diversity of perspectives within Sufism accommodates a variety of epistemological and experiential models. Sufis knew that various ways of direct knowing were possible. *Jadhba* (attraction) was one of them, in which a single mystical experience could exalt the seeker into a state of ecstasy. However, some seekers behaved with impropriety under the force of the spiritual compulsion exerted on them, and earned themselves the name of *madhjub* (the attracted one), often meant to indicate someone completely lost and submerged in the divine unity and thrown out of the way of normal behavior (Bursevi, 1981, pp. 22–23; Schimmel, 1975, p. 105). The behavior displayed by the *madhjub*, who became bereft of their senses and whose actions and speech religious law prohibited, was considered immature and irresponsible (Schimmel, 1975, p. 19). Sufis were encouraged to transition from their ecstatic states to more sober states, since remaining in the ecstatic state could result in *muallah* (mad in God), leading to speech or behavior that may be misunderstood by the uninitiated (Toussulis, 2010, pp. 171, 178).

Transpersonal psychologists may be tempted to find some correlation in the category of experience known as “spiritual emergency,” where a spiritual emergence, characterized as a spontaneous transformative experience, can catapult a person into an emergency if psychological maturation is not sufficient to accommodate the experience. If the requisite work to integrate psychological issues has not been done in advance, the spiritual experience can result in an overwhelming and dangerous situation (Grof & Grof, 1990; Lukoff, Lu, & Turner, 1998). Avoiding necessary shadow work at various stages of development could result in difficulties later in life and be symptomatic of “spiritual bypassing,” a term coined in transpersonal psychology for those Western seekers who aim to catapult over their personal psychological problems for the transcendent experience that they perceive as promised by Eastern spiritual traditions (Welwood, 2002, p. 207). Whether a direct comparison can be

made to the situation of the *madhjub* is unclear, given that many of the *madhjub* were considered to have achieved a high degree of spiritual realization, but had become crazed and stuck in their ecstatic state. The effects of excessive spiritual practice or lack of guidance might equally explain the disorientation and behavior of some of the *madhjub* described in the literature.

The Sufi literature contains many references to ways of knowing that do not involve formal initiation into a dervish order or coming under the direction of a teacher. One of these ways is associated with Uways al-Qarani, a contemporary of the Prophet who lived in Yemen. The two never met, but one of the Sayings of the Prophet is understood to refer to Uways and to his awareness of Uways' level of realization: "I find the Breath of the all-Merciful (*nafas ar-rahman*) coming to me from the direction of Yemen" (Chittick, 1989, p. 127). Uways represents the prototype of the uninitiated Sufi who has attained illumination and is guided solely by divine grace outside the regular path of being guided by a living *sheikh* (Schimmel, 1975, p. 28). An Uwaysi may also be initiated by a non-visible teacher, as it was said of Kharaqani that he was initiated by the powerful spirit of Bayazid Bistami, while Attar was inspired by the spirit of Hallaj (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 89, 105).

The Uwaysi way represents a non-traditional and non-linear way of realization, a model for the possibility of immediate and direct gnosis without any intermediary, and in a certain manner sanctioned by the Prophet himself with respect to his proclamations concerning Uways. A contemporary example is found in the Beshara School which notably downplays the importance of a living teacher as less relevant for modern times, and emphasizes a direct approach that could be called Uwaysi (Taji-Farouki, 2007, pp. 164–169).

Khidr, who appears in the Qur'an (Sura 18) as the mysterious companion of Moses and instructs him in the knowledge of the unseen world but whom Moses is unable to comprehend due to Khidr's seemingly unlawful actions, offers another manner of initiation by a nonhuman master into the highest sources of mystical inspiration (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 105–106). The encounter between Moses and Khidr

is a classic study of the distinction between the types of knowledge associated with prophecy (or law-abiding), with that of the mysterious wisdom of the unseen world (*ilm ladunni*), respectively (Austin, 1971, pp. 259–260). Carl Jung (2014) described this encounter as the ego-consciousness reacting to the superior guidance of the self:

To the initiate who is capable of transformation it is a comforting tale; to the obedient believer, an exhortation not to murmur against Allah's incomprehensible omnipotence. Khidr symbolizes not only the higher wisdom but also a way of acting which is in accord with this wisdom and transcends reason. (p. 141)

Ibn 'Arabi himself claimed to have received initiation from Khidr, in the form of a mantle (*khirqa*), which is an accepted form of transmission in Sufism (Austin, 1971, p. 39), a claim made by other Sufis as well. Spiritual transmission in all cases is the common denominator by which a seeker receives guidance, though the means can be various – through a living teacher or a teacher from the imaginal world.

The existence of spontaneous, non-mediated models of development within Islam remains a rich and largely unexplored area for transpersonal psychology. Spontaneous spiritual emergence has been identified in modern times as a valid psychological category of experience (Grof & Grof, 1990; Louchakova, 2007). Direct experience or intuition of the Real in Sufism is well documented and understood, and categories of spiritual knowing are described in a highly nuanced and refined way: *dhawq* (taste), *kashf* (unveiling), *fath* (opening), *basira* (insight) and *shuhud* (witnessing). In Sufism spiritual emergence is not typically contextualized in personal trauma, whereas transpersonal psychology may offer new insights into underlying psychological issues that may determine when and if spiritual emergence becomes spiritual emergency.

Sufi practices

The Sufi Shah Wali Allah of Delhi formalized a model of spiritual understanding and development that is in use by some Sufi orders. The concept of *lata'if* refers to the subtle spiritual centers associated with areas of the body, not unlike the Hindu concept of *chakras*, and was used to explain psychological

and spiritual progress in the context of *fana* and *baqa*. Various Sufi orders used five-fold, seven-fold, or ten-fold levels of *lata'if* (Hermansen, 1988). The Naqshbandi taught the *dhikr* of the five *lata'if* (Schimmel, 1975), the Kubrawiyya taught a system of seven *lata'if* as inner senses or subtle centers corresponding to the spiritual faculties of the seven prophets Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus, and Muhammad (Waley, 1997), while Shah Wali Allah developed a system in which the spirit operates at three different levels, roughly equivalent of matter/body, intelligence/rationality, and angelic/spirit, and associated in the body with liver, heart and mind but not to be identified solely with body parts as these centers have correspondences with higher cosmological structures.

Progress through the *lata'if* involves, at the lower levels, harmonizing and balancing physical components through a proper cooperation of body, heart and mind. Beyond the initial requirements is the cultivation of the spirit (*ruh*) and the mystery (*sirr*). Activation of the subtle centers requires both practice and contemplation: maintaining ritual purity, Qur'anic recitation, mystical exercises such as remembrance of the Divine Names (*dhikr*), and contemplation of God's attributes (Hermansen, 1988, p. 20). Differences in the original constitution (*fitra*) mean that the seeker, even after activating all the centers, will still be dominated by the same *latifa* in which he or she was originally strongest. Activation of *lata'if* can also be understood as forms of consciousness, opening up the subtle dimension (Almaas, 1998, p. 143).

In contemporary times the system of *lata'if* has been taught by Idries Shah (1978), and notably by A. H. Almaas in the Diamond Approach (e.g., Almaas, 1998). By combining depth psychology with the inner psychological discoveries of the Sufis, Almaas represents a modern movement to bring Islam and Sufism into the fold of transpersonal psychology. The psychodynamic approach, fused with Sufi-inspired methods, is used to confront the personality and allow for the eventual unfolding of essence.

A striking use case of the impact of Sufi teachings in the West can be found in the way Sufi stories have been used as therapeutic vehicles for inner transformation. The stories are said to be

symbolic of psychospiritual states, and the reading and investigation of the stories of the fabled Mullah Nasruddin are said to provide fresh and surprising insights that can shift and destabilize the student's regular mode of consciousness, triggering and revealing personal issues.

Idries Shah (1970) and his American student, the psychologist Robert Ornstein, popularized the teaching of Sufi stories; the reading and re-reading of stories has been compared to the practice of *dhikr* by some of their followers (Hermansen, 2006). The truths embedded in the stories are seen as powerful supplements to traditional psychotherapeutic and psychiatric practice, and provide tools for deeper individual development (Deikman, 1996). A study of the self-perceived effects of Sufi stories and their developmental effects may show a mapping to the stages of the development of the *nafs*, as well as to Wilber's ladder model of development (Safken, 1988).

There is perhaps no practice more associated with Sufism than that of *dhikr*, (or *zikr*) which means remembrance, recollection, or invocation. The practice is derived from the Qur'anic verses "and recollect God often" (Qur'an 33:40) and "in nothing but the recollection of God are the hearts satisfied" (Qur'an 13:28). *Dhikr* is a practice that can be done at any time, in silence or aloud, and its form typically takes the repetition of a formula or one of the Divine Names, e.g. *la ilaha il Allah* (there is no God but God), *Allah* (God the Divinity, Godhead), *Ya Hadi* (O Guide), *Ya Rahman ya Rahim* (O Merciful, O Compassionate). The *dhikr* of the Divine Names is an important Sufi practice, and when done authentically as a *dhikr* of the heart can result in a profound transformative experience; the action of *dhikr*, remembering God through the Names, resonates or replicates in a certain sense the primordial *dhikr* of God's pre-temporal activity of "remembering" the individual before he or she was manifested in time and space. Subject and object are eventually indiscernible, and the goal of the *dhikr* is achieved in a mystical union. As the Sufi Shibli said, "True *dhikr* is that you forget your *dhikr*" (Schimmel, 1975, pp. 167-178).

Ninety-Nine most beautiful Names are enumerated in the Qur'an, although the attributes of God cannot be limited and the Names are said to be infinite in number. The Names themselves are

divided into names of majesty and names of beauty. Names of majesty include names of power, wrath, authority, and justice, and may be overwhelming for the novice, while names of beauty include names of grace, generosity, compassion, and beauty. Both are necessary for the existence of the world, thus participation through *dhikr* reinforces the notion of God as the only actor, through expelling from consciousness everything other than God (Ernst, 1997, p. 97).

The Naqshbandi *dhikr* of the five *lata'if* is closely correlated with specific areas of the heart and chest and directly associated with defined levels of personal transformation (Schimmel, 1975, p. 174). The Christian practice of the Prayer of the Heart as devised by the early Desert Fathers was similarly applied in a systemic way as a path of inner transformation, and has been shown to offer significant insights into contemporary models of ego transformation (Louchakova, 2007).

One of the most recognizable forms of *dhikr* known in the West is that of the "Turning" of the Whirling Dervishes. It is related that Rumi, inspired by Shams i-Tabrizi to become a poet and a lover of music, was walking down the street one day and heard the beating of the hammer of a goldsmith. With each beat, he started to hear *Allah, Allah*, until everything around him resonated with the name of God. He began to whirl in ecstasy in the middle of the street, his arms unfurled and his head tilted back. He also turned when reciting poetry, in an altered state of consciousness. Thus was born the practice of Turning, a form of *dhikr* that includes movement, music, and the repetition of the name of God (*Allah*), as the practitioner turns counter-clockwise. It is a form of concentrative ecstatic meditation that reflects the larger cosmological order in every way, establishing an alignment between the macrocosmic order of being and the microcosmic forms reflected in the *sema* (whirling). The hat of the dervish represents the tombstone of the ego, the black outer garment represents the body that is shed when the dervish starts to turn, and the white inner garment represents their burial shroud. The *sheikh* turns in the center, symbolizing the sun while the dervishes are as planets revolving around the sun while each spinning on their own axis. The right palm faces up

to receive grace, while the left faces down to pass the grace to the earth (Friedlander, 1975, pp. 56–93). The structure and unfolding of the ceremonial *sema*, which is regulated by strict rules, mirrors a microcosm of the journey of the dervish to union (*tawhid*), and the turning becomes a re-enactment of the dervish's return to their source.

Conclusion

The declaration of faith (*shahada*) for Muslims is to assert that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is his messenger. These two articles of faith serve equally as the foundation for the Sufi path, and centuries of hermeneutics have developed key formulations of great relevance to transpersonal and integral studies.

The first key is the notion of the Oneness of Being (*wahdat al-wujud*), which is one of the strongest articulations of non-duality found within any of the monotheistic wisdom traditions. Progress on the path, as the individual self moves through successive stages of increasingly refined knowledge, is mapped cognitively and existentially to the underlying reality that in fact all progress is actually the One Real Being coming to know Itself through its own self-disclosure in the form of the individual. The second key is the possibility of realization for all human beings, formulated as the Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*) and embodied by Muhammad as the ideal archetype. Each person is a self-disclosure of the One and created with an original nature (*fitra*) that has never separated from its source, and each person is endowed with a unique predisposition (*isti'dad*) that defines the shape of how his or her progress and journeying will unfold. The deep understanding of structures of the self, of their stages and transformations, and the practices to enhance and promote conscious change, is the lasting legacy of the Sufis.

The paradox of mystical transformation turns on the fact that realization comes not as a result of pursuing a personal goal of fulfillment as an end in itself, but as a result of complete surrender (*islam*) to a higher or deeper order of being, and of abandonment of any notion of personal gain which subsequently allows one's innate divine nature to emerge. Context is key: individuation is a process of the One knowing Itself in and through Its own

image as the Perfect Human (*al-insan al-kamil*). Through alignment and submission to an inherent logico order, and a commitment to the clearing out of the shadows of the self through practice and inner verification (*tahqiq*), the seeker continues to draw nearer to the divine presence by successive annihilations (*fana*) “until they are loved,” and they become the journeyers who remain (*baqa*) forever in the presence of the consciousness and existence of the One Being (*wujud*).

The emergence of the transpersonal self arises, first, from the fragmentation of the illusory self as the veils of ignorance and separation are lifted, and, second, as a re-integration (*jam*) of self that is in reality the self-disclosure of the One Being. Once this integration has occurred, progress is seen as ongoing and infinite. Ibn ‘Arabi (1972) made this observation of the nature of progress:

The self (*nafs*) is an ocean without shore. Gazing on it has no end in this world or the next. It is the nearest guide [to reality]: the more one observes it, the more knowledge one has of it, and the more self-knowledge one has, the more one has knowledge of one’s Lord.” (IV.68)

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