

# OPENING THE DOOR TO ECSTASY

The physical and spiritual discipline of Sufism is rapidly gaining popularity in the West, offering as it does an antidote to the pollutants of life in 'developed' countries, as well as a deep connection to the joy and ecstasy that is our birthright. In *Kindred Spirit's* first Email interview, John Clamp 'talks' to Adnan Sarhan, who, as Head of the Sufi Foundation of America, is blazing a trail in this work, both stateside and here in the UK.

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***Kindred Spirit:*** Some of our readers might not know what Sufism is. Please can you explain it?

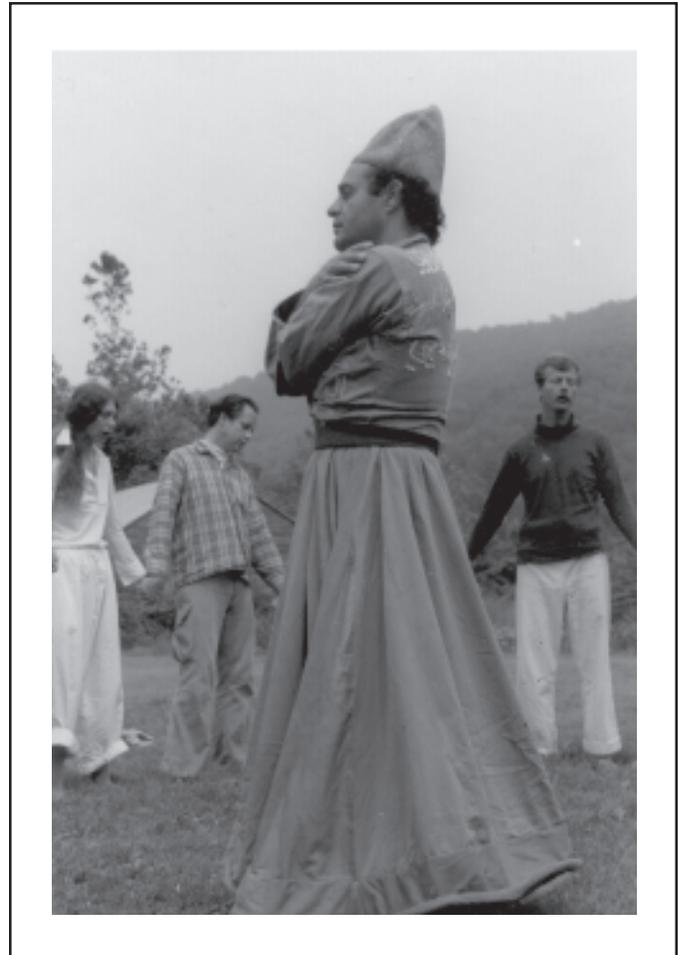
**Adnan Sarhan:** The word "sufi" means purity as a whole, including the mind, the psyche, the emotions, the body, the thoughts. This also includes the purity of our food and drink. When all of these have been adjusted to be pure, then reality becomes very different. We are able to blend with the purity of our surroundings, and that brings tranquility and contentment.

I was born in Iraq, where civilization started. In ancient times they were very advanced in all kinds of knowledge. Since then, there has always been a lot of interest in the spirit, the self, the soul and the nature of the human being - where we come from, where we are going and what the universe is. These questions set people off on a search for reality. That process has kept going and continues to the present day. In the Middle East, throughout time, there have been many thousands of religions. The message of all these religions was peace and love. And all had something to do with Sufism, with purity.

The biggest development took place in the coming of Islam in the seventh century. Islam combined all these earlier Middle Eastern religions, including Judaism and Christianity. Islam makes no distinctions between the prophets and messengers who have brought the message of peace and love.

**Where did Sufism originate?**

Sufi masters describe the process of Sufism as starting in the time of Adam, when the seeds of Sufism were planted. In the time of Noah, the seeds sprouted. In the time of Abraham, the branches grew. In the time of Moses, the grapes formed. In the time of Jesus, the grapes became ripe. And in the time of Muhammad, the grapes became pure wine. It is in Islam that the greatest developments took place.



Sufism advocates practicality in learning. And the best path of knowledge is through experience, not through judgment. If you experience something, and you find that it is good for you, then you make it part of you. And if it is not good for you, you refute it.

Iraq has always been a seat of knowledge and the home of many Sufi masters. The people there have a disposition toward the spirit and like to go deeply into the self. I grew up in that environment, among people who are tranquil and content. It was very difficult to find people who complained or were

negative. The reason for that positivity was that the spirit was more open in them. If the spirit is not open, then the people complain and are negative. And it is only on the surface that they pretend that they are happy and content.

**Can you describe your own process in Sufism?** In Baghdad, people used to gather in Sufi circles to work on exercises to develop themselves. As a child, I was drawn to these gatherings. I had the ability to know which men and women had inner knowledge, and it was to this knowledge that I was attracted. I was born with a capacity to distinguish inner knowledge from outer knowledge. I also learned from my mother and father, who had inner knowledge. I started teaching children and I never stopped teaching. Now I teach in the US, Canada, Europe, South America, the Middle East and elsewhere.

**One hadith (Sufi sacred sentence) says: "Faith is a knowledge in the heart, a voicing with the tongue and an activity with the limbs". Do you think this active element to Sufism sets it apart from other philosophies or faiths?**

This hadith perfectly expresses Sufism. Faith that comes through practical action becomes real faith. It becomes reality that arises from knowledge and understanding, not from intellectual browsing. The greater the intelligence of the heart, the more capacity for perceiving and understanding. Practical action and exercises are the basic work of Sufism. This differs from philosophy based on the intellect, logic and calculation.

**What is the "Rapid Method"? Is it something you have per-**

**sonally developed or is it culled from extant Sufi traditions?** The Rapid Method is anything that puts you directly in the presence of your self with God quickly. It does not depend upon words. The action and the practicality are what bring the change. In my work, I omit all the talk because I discovered that the intellect is very limited in its ability to bring development to the spirit.

**What gave you the impulse to teach Sufism in the West? Is there anything about the Sufi tradition that you think makes it especially adapted to western needs? Having asked that, what exactly are "western" needs?** By nature, Sufis are teachers when there is interest in the work, and when people are serious. Western countries have gone too far in the direction of materialism and technology, in the expectation that these will create a utopia. In reality, this has not happened. But what has happened is negative strife, because they have neglected the development of the spirit. This has caused imbalance: if westerners were balanced, they would be content, happy, and tranquil, enjoying life and being productive in things that bring high and real development for humanity.

**Is there a spiritual link between the Sufi tradition and the Christian Gnostic tradition? What do they have in common?** The Sufi wants things to happen now, in this life, and to find whether there is truth in the things to come later. The technique I use is all pleasure-giving in the direction of spirit. This puts people in the moment. They fall into a state of drunkenness that arises from cosmic wine and is therefore

also a state of sobriety. When drunkenness and sobriety become one, you fall into ecstasy. When you are in ecstasy, you fall into the moment, and the moment opens to you and becomes like a sea of time. The moment is the house of the spirit. When you are in the moment, you will dance with the spirit, and God will entertain you, and life becomes lovable.

Christian Gnostics work very hard, hoping that when they die they will find the truth. There was a period of time, from the time of Jesus until about 800 AD, during which the Gnostics were practicing Sufi techniques as taught by Jesus. They were scattered in the Middle East - in the mountains, in the desert, in remote places. Christian Gnostics and Sufis would practice together.

**Could you tell us about the strong relationship between the physical and spiritual that you bring to your work?** There is no spiritual without the physical. If you don't have the physical, you don't have the spiritual. The physical is the vehicle for the spirit. If the body is not in good condition and not under control, then the spirit will not function well. The senses, the whims, the desires, the lust, the negative self, and the intellect all belong to the body, and when the body dies, they die with it. It is important to discipline and control all of these elements and to make them work for the spirit. Then you become complete.

**The great teacher Rumi said that love is the renunciation of will, and yet your work seems to be about self-control as well as self-expression. What is the role of the will in the Sufi work that you do? And if Islam**

**means “submission to the divine will”, how can people tell the difference between will that is ego-driven and will that is indeed “divine”?**

For the beginner, you need the discipline and training of the will until you are in command. When you achieve this and the spirit comes alive and the spirit is love, then you get into partnership with the spirit and love. The spirit is beyond discipline because it is pure, and the spirit does not recognize anything that is not pure or is negative. So the love becomes pure. And when the love is pure, you become pure, and you do not need discipline. That love is cosmic, and there is no negative element in it. It encompasses everything. It is beyond the concept of ordinary love that human beings experience.

**I have read that Sufis regard the heart (“al-qalb” in Arabic) rather than the brain as the real seat of the intellect? Can you explain this to our readers?**

There are two levels of intelligence. One is limited intelligence, and that is what human beings have. The other is known as universal intelligence. That is when a person advances in inner knowledge. Once someone is advanced in inner knowledge, they will be in contact with the universal intelligence.

There are also two types of intelligence. One is the intellect, and that is in the head. And that deals with academic knowledge and education that is based on analysis, judgment and perseverance in thought. A lot of calculation goes with it. The intellect is also connected with our senses, desires, needs, the negative self and the ego.

The intellect always deals with tension, greed, selfishness and so on. All of these belong to the body.

The other type is the intelligence of the heart. This can be experienced on many levels, according to the development and the growth in the spirit. The intelligence of the heart is connected with understanding, awareness, intuition, premonition, perceptions, love and the spirit. When intellect cooperates with the body, it will throw the person out of balance. When the intellect becomes subservient to the intelligence of the heart, it will free the body, according to the wishes of the intelligence of the heart.

When spirit becomes awake, the body becomes tranquil, and the body moves into a state of healing. **What is the practice of “whirling” designed to do?** Whirling is designed to bring higher energy, awareness, centering, focusing; to put you in the present; to bring strength to the senses, the body, the psyche; to balance the emotions; to aid perception of and opening to the intelligence of the heart. It is a very powerful exercise that puts you in the moment and blends the past, the present and the future in one. It takes you beyond meditation and snatches you out of any confused, negative reality to leave you positive and tranquil. It brings a lot of changes and puts you in a state of complete detachment from all the nonsense and the trivia that people value as important.

**What kind of meditation do you teach?**

I teach meditation through action - moving, dancing, breathing. We do activities that involve you completely in the moment. When you are in the moment, you bypass the meditation, so that whatever

you are doing, whether walking or talking or working, you still maintain that state. This kind of “action meditation” is more natural than other types. And it happens spontaneously - without the struggle of a sitting meditation. It is very difficult to calm the mind by sitting because the mind is involved in countless thoughts, and the ego prevents the mind from being still. It is not in the interest of the ego that a person should be in harmony with the self. The ego takes delight in confusing and destroying the man or woman.

**Many spiritual traditions, not least Islam, incorporate sacred dance into their activities. What is the purpose of sacred dance, and is there anything that sets the kind of dancing practiced by Sufis apart from other types of sacred dance?**

When a dance is connected to the spirit within, it becomes a state of rapture. It becomes the border between the body and the spirit. Then it becomes the connection between the two. When the dance comes from the spirit, it brings joy and pleasure to the person experiencing it. It makes freedom a reality. It will take the person to the inner senses that are located between the soul and the body. When the inner senses become alive, the senses of the body become the attributes of the inner senses.

**Does the use of the drum in your work have its roots in the drumming of shamans? How does the beat of the drum shift participants’ state of mind?**

The kind of drumming I do has its roots in Sumeria, Babylon and Assyria. Drums were developed in that ancient time in Iraq. And the drum rhythm has varied uses in dif-

ferent aspects of life, whether in celebration, singing, dancing, marching, or performing. It is also used in different healing techniques.

Everyone in the world has an affinity to the sound of a drum, so it is like a common language. The reason for that is because everything in creation has rhythm. Planets and galaxies move in a swirling rhythm. The air and sea move in rhythms. The trees dance in a rhythm. The birds sing and fly in a rhythm. Everything in nature is a rhythm, even the atom. A human being is made of rhythm: the heart, the pulse, our breathing. Talking is a rhythm. Rhythm creates dancing phenomena. And the rhythm of a drum represents all of these things. When drumming is perfected, it is able to bring healing and happiness.

The mind is like a computer, affected by sound, vibration and impact. When the mind is exposed to the wrong sound, vibration or impact, distortion is caused which leads to disturbance, weakness and sickness. If, on the other hand, the mind is exposed to a rhythm that has been perfected, the mind will be shifted to an altered state of consciousness, one of tranquility and contentment.

The drum puts a person in the moment, because the perfect-yet-varied rhythm does not permit the mind to go astray into the realms of negative thought. It gathers and focuses the mind. That gives strength, command, and pleasure, and makes the person lovable. It brings higher intelligence.

**What is it that attracts people to your work rather than to some other form of participatory spirituality?**

People are attracted to my work because it is pure play. It is the play

of the spirit, using the body in action and motion, engaging the movement of the body, and being sensitive to the space; blending with the vibration of the space and gathering hidden cosmic intelligence.

When the body is activated in a certain way, it is possible, through pure play, to acquire spirit that is connected to the inner body. Through the activation of the strength and the power of that inner body, which is closer to the soul, it is possible to receive the spirit, through the connection of the breath to the reservoir of intelligence and spirit that exists abundantly in the expanse of the universe. When a person becomes ready for that connection, that intelligence and spirit comes to the person in abundance and enriches them. This leads to great change.

What prevents the person from knowing or understanding these forces is the habit and conditioning that is commanded by the senses, the desires, the sensuality, the negative self, the ego, and the animal soul. People can be enslaved by their habits and desires, and they think that that is what life is all about. It is only when a person becomes a master of the self and is free from habits and desires that he will be able to proceed to a magical, beautiful reality. To oppose the desires of the negative self is the highest action one can perform.

**What is the objective of the Sufi Foundation of America?**

The objective is to heal people and to cleanse them of all their bad habits, like smoking and drinking: these are impurities and poison. The object is to trim people, firm them, make them beautiful, complete and perfect. When they are cleared of impurities, it is easy to proceed to-

wards finding the self and the spirit.

Traditionally, the Sufi has a duty to teach where people are willing to learn, but, of course, the work is more effective if the people are willing to change.

**Is there anything else you would like to communicate to our readers?**

There is a word in Arabic, *ijtihad*. It means "to strive". That word is the key to all kinds of progress in the world, whether mundane or spiritual. *Ijtihad* is based on experience. To experience something, you must not judge or analyze, otherwise it is not possible to find what you want because experience is the best way of knowledge.

In Sufi work you have to be free from limitation or confinement, and thus the teaching is based on being in the moment. It is the act of concentration in the moment that opens the doors to hidden knowledge.

In reality, however, there is no hidden knowledge. It is only when people have lost contact with it that it becomes hidden, because that knowledge exists, whether or not we are aware of it. What stops you from knowing it is the limitation of intelligence. The broader the intelligence, the more exposure you have to a different stratum of existence. The level of intelligence of a fly is not the same as an elephant. It is through revelation, not affirmation, that you come to know what you don't know. Academic knowledge, philosophy, books and lectures will never show you a whiff of spirit.

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