

Philip Gowins
Practical Sufism :A Guide to the Spiritual Path
(Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2010, 219pp).

*Enough of phrases and conceits and metaphors !
I want burning, burning, become familiar with
that burning! Light up a fire of love in thy soul,
Burn all thought and expressions away.*

Jalal al-Din Rumi

Sufism — mysticism in the Islamic world — has flourished chiefly in Arab countries and in Persia, and later in what is now India and Pakistan. In Persia and Indian Sub-continent, Sufism built upon earlier pre-Islamic traditions of mystic thought. As Walter Stace noted in his *The Teachings of the Mystics* “The natural drift toward pantheism which is a general feature of mysticism in the West — where the theologians and ecclesiastical authorities try to suppress it and brand it as heresy — is even more pronounced in Sufism than in Christianity — although Muslim orthodoxy disapproves of it quite as emphatically as Christian orthodoxy does. Indeed, the Islamic disapproval may be stronger than the Christian, owing to its more rigid monotheism. After all, no Christian mystic was ever martyred for his pantheistic utterances, whereas this did happen in Baghdad” to Al Hallaj in 922.

Sufism is not one homogenous body of thought or a well-defined set of doctrines and practices. There is considerable internal diversity. However, central to Sufi practice is the role of the spiritual teacher (pir or sheikh) who is believed to have received esoteric wisdom from his own master forming a chain. The role of the teacher has always been to guide the disciple in ways of meditation or other mystical practices often related to breathing so he would acquire spiritual insight through inner experience.

These chains can be considered to be separate spiritual orders. Often the tomb of a Sufi leader becomes a shrine and a pilgrimage site. In Pakistan recently, there have been armed attacks on popular Sufi shrines carried out by more legalistic Muslim groups.

Spirituality, in the Sufi tradition, cannot be set apart from life itself, and spiritual development can only be realized through living life to the fullest expression of our potential, using all of our human faculties with the ideal of becoming a more complete human being.

Phillip Gowin is part of a Sufi “chain” that began in 1910 when an Indian teacher Hazrat Inayat Khan, of the Chishti Sufi Order, named after the Indian town where it had its headquarters came to the West to create a Sufi movement in North America and Europe. He set his headquarter in Geneva, an international city because of the League of Nations. He married Ora Baker, a cousin of Mary Baker Eddy, founder of Christian Science. His son Vilayat Inayat Khan succeeded him. In 2000, the grandson Zia Inayat Khan assumed leadership of what has become the Sufi Order International.

In the West, the Islamic base of the teaching is rarely stressed though it is not denied. Most of the members do not come from traditional Muslim families. Here in France where I

have had some contacts, most members are not from North Africa which makes up the bulk of the Islamic population but are rather Europeans who are looking for meditation techniques and who could have chosen Tibetan Buddhism had a different opportunity presented itself.

Pir Vilayat has written on the aims of his work: “I am trying to develop an updated spirituality for our times. I believe that to develop our own being to the highest potential we need to discover our ideal and allow an inborn strength, a conviction in ourselves, to give us the courage toward developing this ideal. This requires both knowing our life purpose and mastery or discipline over ourselves in terms of body, mind, and emotions. With an attitude of joy and enthusiasm, we do not suppress but instead control and direct impulses toward the fulfilment of our goals.”

There is a good deal of emphasis placed on “opening the heart” and love as love is considered to be an attribute of God. Pir Vilayat wrote “When the light of love has been lit, the heart becomes transparent, so that the intelligence of the soul can see through it; but until the heart is kindled by the flame of love, the intelligence, which is constantly yearning to experience life on the surface, is groping in the dark.”

Phillip Gowins book outlines exercises linked both to breathing and to creative visualization in meditation. The subtitle of the book is “A Field Guide to the Spiritual Path”. However, the emphasis is on the need for a teacher as writings are only of limited help and in working alone one may misjudge one’s own progress on the path.

Rene Wadlow

