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Saturday

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

Title: [The Purpose of Sufism is to Refine Our Character](#)

DVD title: Spiritual Education: Foundation Principles the Sufi Lives By

Suhat: In the grand mosque in Medina, at the time of Prophet Muhammed (sal), there was as you know a special area called a “*suf*,” set away from where the other people prayed. It was a place for *tarbiyya* / education and under the special supervision of the Prophet (sal). A lot of the early Sahabah and early Muslims spent time there. They spent a lot of time learning what was being revealed. Nobody knew this new way of living. They had to learn, not only about this God called Allah (because they were all polytheists at the time, except for the Jews of Medina and some of the Christians), but they had to learn what this relationship of Allah should be and what was proper, and how to act in the society of other Muslims.

Many of them spent a lot of time there, working just enough to earn the bare necessities of life, to support their families and put food on the table, so they wouldn’t become a burden on society, the community/*ummah*. They would spend that time praying and observing all their *fard*/obligatory, *sunnah* and *nafle* prayers. They would stay up all night, then prayer the *tahajūd* prayer before Fajr. That was the place. Whether you call it a *sūfa*, a *tekkia*, a *khanaqah* like this is, or a *zāwiya*, it’s a place for learning. It’s a place to understand your relationship with Allah, and understand your relationship with others. They were more attached to their spiritual practices than their worldly work. They weren’t monks by any means. Monkery is not permitted in Islam. They have to be in the world and live, but they preferred their spiritual practices to their material work.

We don't know what the earliest practices of the Prophet (sal) were, or what he gave to the people, because it was revealed over 23 years. We can assume, and we know from certain *hadiths*, that the Prophet addressed people individually, like when he was in the cave with Abu Bakr as-Siddiq. He told him not to worry, be silent, remember Allah and not be afraid when Abu Sufyan and the Qureysh were hunting for them. So we know from that, that he gave instructions according to the temperament of the people.

Although everyone prayed, or learned eventually how to pray in the same way, as the way of praying was revealed after Isra Miraj, we know that there were individual instructions and guidance. To this day, there is individual guidance and instruction along with what everyone else does together.

Of course, he realized that different people had different capacities, and he would at times discuss those different capacities. The object being that there was enough freedom within the teachings of Islam, because of the inner spiritual values. It is what we come later to understand as Sufism. Though it didn't have that name at the time, it did have the reality in the life of the Prophet (sal). There was enough freedom or leeway to select the best ways to accomplish what needed to be accomplished. The Prophet (sal) once said, ***“Wisdom is the lost property of the believer. Wherever he should find it, he should recover it.”*** He's telling us that the role of a spiritual person, a believer (in this case he's using the term *mu'min*, not Muslim) is to understand that wisdom is inherent. It belongs to us, but it has been lost. We should seek it and when we find it, we should capture it and cherish it. How do you do that?

We understand that the way of doing that is through certain spiritual practices and attitudes that we call Tasawwuf and Sufism. Islam envisions a set of beliefs. Some of it is embellished, as in every religion, to beautify the acts of devotion and worship. Like in the *sema*, we do certain things that are not necessary. The incense is not necessary; the candle is not necessary. Each has its meaning, but is unnecessary. They are certain embellishments to remind us of the beauty and of the way in which we should set our

intention or mood for what's to follow. Part of that is taking the life of the Prophet Muhammed (sal) as a model, and developing good personal *adab* and good conduct. We begin with fulfilling the duties that are assigned to us by Allah (swt) in the Qur'an, revealed in Hadith Quds and in the behavior (*sīrah*) and life of the Prophet (sal), and indeed, revealed and practiced in the life of the other prophets, especially the prophets Ibrahim, Dawud, Musa, Harun, and Isa (may Allah send His Blessings on all of them).

These are the tools that are available to everyone, that were transmitted to the people who later became Muslims. They are the primary tools of the Sufi. Those things are the means through which you see in depth the mysteries and inner meanings. There are other practices we know about that help us to see more deeply, like *khilwa*, periods of time in retreat; *mahasabat*, taking account of ourselves like we did tonight; *muraqabah*, meditation; and *fikr*, *tafakkur*, contemplation. These are there to help us both in the outer/*dhāhir* and inner/*bātin* development.

Sometimes things happen in the world and we are not so sure how to handle them. We are not walking around having visions all the time or mystical moments where a voice is telling us “do this and do that.” The practices that we have are designed for everyone, and they are not to set one person above another or make one person better than another. They are to give opportunity to everyone equally. They are tools given by Allah to certain people with the idea that they might be better able to serve this creation and Allah. But to the Sufi, this word “mystic” has a very special meaning. It implies the intention/*niyyat* of the Prophet Mohammed (sal). His intention was to heighten the moral and ethical character of people. He said, **“I did not come to create a new religion. I came to uplift and solidify and deepen the character/akhlaq of people,”** especially those who had fallen to the wayside during the time of the *jahaliyya* before Islam. He was to bring them a truth and help them act in a righteous way, and have good *adab*. That was the purpose.

In that sense, Sufism is a method of developing *adab*, the best behavior; *akhlaq*, character; or ‘*aqīda* in every circumstance. You can define it in the way you want, but it is the means one uses in living life, beginning with controlling oneself; and understanding one’s own self in the context of society and in one’s day-to-day life; and especially developing sincerity and gratitude toward Allah and generosity toward other human beings, realizing Allah is present during daily life. No matter what anyone says or writes about the Sufis or the mystics, we have to understand that these are the people who take very seriously – and I hope since you may refer to yourself as Sufis, that you do too – take very, very seriously the opportunity to live your life and do your very best in everything that you do. Whether you are a child in school, an adult working at a job, or even an elder who is passing, you want to do it in the best and most noble way to be an exemplar, an example to others.

The external duties and responsibilities we have in the *dīn* – fasting, praying, giving to charity, abstaining from wrong things, studying Qur’an, making Hajj if it’s possible – are wonderful things, and we have to do them, but internally, we have to spend most of our time refining ourselves. The way that we see how refined we are is how we act in the world and how we act towards others. I hope we all spend time refining and deepening our faith and submission, our gratitude and *adab* toward Allah. Where we meet Allah, where we come to realize that Divine Presence is when we are in that state of balance, *mīzān*. We may go up and down, but our baseline is contentment and fulfillment. Our baseline is peace.

For the average person, that’s a very difficult process, especially when you get to the point where you realize that the only way you can get through the barriers that are set up by your own ego is humility. It’s very, very difficult. It’s not something you can say, “I’m going to wake up tomorrow morning and be a humble person.” Would that you could do that, but we can’t. We have to perform the acts that cause humility, have less

expectations, serve people who have no appreciation, put yourself second or third, or fourth in line. It's very, very difficult.

There are people who want from Sufism self-realization, but they are on the wrong path. That's a gift of Allah. What you want from Sufism is refinement of character, to be able to serve Allah better. What you want from Sufism is not to want anything, but to be able to receive the ocean that is washing over you, of contentment, of beauty, of love. It is to want the knowledge of how to be the most grateful person to Allah. You work tirelessly, like we may do at our jobs. We may love our work and want to work forever and ever at it, but we have to also tirelessly serve Allah. It is wonderful if your work serves Allah.

“If you mention Allah’s name in a gathering, He will mention your name in a gathering better than that.” You know I don't like to attribute human qualities to Allah, but if you speak in a metaphorical sense, then you can say that if Allah had wants, which of course Allah does not, it would be like an attraction/*jedhba* in the universe. We know there are attractions in the universe, electromagnetic and gravitational. There is the attraction Allah has for the sincere seeker, the *murīd* who becomes *murād* (called by Allah); Allah is attracted. That Divine Presence attracts the individual who manifests those qualities and names.

If you are a truly compassionate human being, you are attracted to the Source of all compassion. If you are a peaceful human being, you are attracted to the Source of all peace, as-Salām. If you are a patient human being, you are attracted to Allah as as-Sabūr. Whatever you have is added on to that. You find that concept in Christianity and everywhere; it is added on to it. Who adds on to it? Allah adds on to it. If I take a drop of water, and drop it into this glass of water, it disappears. It goes back to the whole water, and you cannot distinguish the drop from the water anymore. Our compassion is like that. All of a sudden, you feel you have access to all mercy, all knowledge, all

compassion, all justice, all truth, all love, all patience, all perseverance, etc. And you realize you are just a drop in the ocean of that, *alhamdulillah*.

I think we forget that we are honored with those attributes. We are honored with that. Sometimes I think the flowers are so beautiful, because they know they are honored with beauty, and they want to show the most of it. We need to show off our compassion, mercy, tolerance, patience, and understanding. This is the greatest gift. So we work tirelessly, hopefully, to do that, to pay our attention toward Allah. *Main mutawajjoh hoom qalb kiteraf, qalb mutawajjoh he zat pak kiteraf*. I pay attention to my heart; my hearts pays attention to Allah. If I pay attention to myself, my self will pay attention to its Source. If I activate my self, then my self will move actively toward its source. We see that. We see it in physics and chemistry; we see it in human behavior.

You hear stories about people who moved away, and their cat ran away during the moving process. Then six months later, it shows up at their new house across the country. It somehow tracked the people to their new home. We've heard the stories. How does the salmon find the point in the river, miles and miles up river, where it was conceived? Because there are trails left: trails of pheromones and electro-magnetic fields. The whales find their way thousands of miles to their nesting grounds. So we shouldn't be surprised that there are ways for us to find our way back to Allah. And Allah is not thousands of miles away. It's only in the earth that we have to think of thousands of miles and long rivers. Allah is present.

For us, it is just lifting the veil. There is always an opportunity to refine oneself. How many opportunities did you have today to refine yourself: not to get upset about something, or get angry, or be impatient, or be inattentive to some need. I had a lot. I give myself a D minus. What do you give yourself? Anybody get an A? Ignorance is not bliss. "I never thought of it, Shaykh, so I don't get a grade." You get graded anyway. You are graded "tardy." Do we still use that word? Now we say "a.w.o.l." We

collectively come together for this purpose as people of Tasawwuf in a *khanaqah*, as a community. A community is not just a place where people live. It is not just a place where you can escape from the world and not have to take real responsibility. You are all responsible people. A community is much more than that. It is a place where people come to unity. It is a place that is constructed so that you have a unique amount of time, support, opportunity and guidance. And you have the ability to express all these attributes of Allah with people of mutual faith and belief, and then take it from there out to the world. It's a wonderful opportunity: a *khanaqah*, a *zāwiya*, a *tekkia*, a community.

We have to remember that every day we are setting patterns, and we can build off those patterns. We will, so they should at least be good ones. We use our work to refine ourselves. We use our service to refine ourselves. We use our worship to refine ourselves, not for the purpose of just refining ourselves. We are refining ourselves for the purpose of serving Allah and serving others. In that way, we recapture the place of honor that we once had. It seems that we are, at least up until this point, fairly unique. Allah has created us; we are unique. We haven't found anybody else in the universe recently; but we may. We may find others, because Allah is Rabbi-l-Ālamīn, Lord of all the Universes. Undoubtedly there are other entities out there, but it seems that we have a special place, at least at this point.

When we are in this *tekkia*, this *khanaqah* we live in, it is a training ground. What are we training for? The Olympics? No. Are we training for the America's Cup? No, we have no big sailboats here. Maybe the Special Olympics! We are training so that we can have eyes that will see, ears that will hear, and knowing that as we walk, operate, speak, serve, that we are doing it *fī sabīli-Llāh*, for the sake of Allah, for the sake of truth. We can all sense the Presence that we cannot see. We can all sense the good words we find hard to hear. We sense it because we were born with that essential goodness. We see life in almost poetic terms. It's why the most beautiful poetry has come out of that part of the world where all the religions have come—Persian poetry, Arabic poetry, the psalms of

Dawud. Why? Why is this the seat of religion and belief? Even, we talk about the Native American's having beautiful traditions, but they came across the land bridge from Central Asia, from the East. It's a hard question to answer, and I don't want to go into some sociological explanation.

When you get to the point where essence resides, it is carried like on the wind. Seeds are carried on the wind, over the seas by people. It is planted everywhere. Finally, you find in the deepest jungles of South America, or the highest reaches where the Inuit live, or here, the seeds of light, truth, love and compassion. They are everywhere, because they are in every human being. Allah created them in every human being, and then spread out those human beings around the world. Allah said, **“Had I wanted, I would have made you one community, but I made you different so that you may come to love and understand one another.”** The real me and the real you that the mystic seeks to discover, that sees the signs and the *‘āyāt* in everything; the one who can hear in the wind the beautiful HUUUU, the beautiful sound of He – His Name; the one who can feel that Divine Presence is one who sincerely embraces Islam and Tasawwuf.

The importance of this lies deep in our heart and soul. It is implanted in us as we come into this world. We spend that wonderful time in the womb of our mothers where we hear the sounds of nature for the first time and we hear the beat of life. The ocean turns into the sounds of our own blood, our own life, and our own breath. That's where we hear and see for the first time. Then we are born into this world, we forget, and we have to relearn it again. If we want to leave a good record behind us, we have to make a contribution to this world. We are not here for no reason at all. We have to have good *adab* toward one another. (We have been speaking of the depths of the meaning of *adab* recently.) We have to have a good attitude. I use the words “have to,” but they are preceded by the phrase “if you want,” then you have to. If you don't want, then it is no problem. You can live like the rest of the people in the world, sort of helter-skelter, not know what is going to happen next, reacting instead of pro-acting.

If you have good *adab*, it makes life meaningful. If you respect your parents, it makes life meaningful. If you respect your neighbor, it makes life meaningful. If you serve without expecting in return, it makes life meaningful and fulfilling. Then you realize you have this great yearning to understand, a great yearning for knowledge. Then nothing can stop you from learning if you have sincere yearning. Because wherever you look, there is something to learn. The knowledge, which is Allah, came pouring out over you, like an ocean crashing on you. Then when you have knowledge, you have to give. When you give, you have completed the circle.

Khadija, the first wife of Prophet Muhammed (sal) said, *“I don’t like to turn away anyone who approaches me with a request. If he is a noble person, then I allow him to retain his nobility. If he is a lowly person, he then allows me to maintain my nobility (dignity).”* It is a wonderful statement. There are so many examples of generosity. Al Hujwiri, an early Sufi in the 10th century, used to be very clever in the way he showed kindness to people and his companions. He would leave them with a thousand dirham and say, “Please keep these for me until I come back.” Then later he would write to them and say, “The money I left there is yours.” They would think they were doing him a favor. Well, the letter did not arrive by Fedex in those days, but by camel from a long way away. So they had to watch his money very carefully for a long period of time, then he tells them, it’s for you.

A man met someone and asked where he was from. He was told, Medina. He said, “A man named Hajji Alib from your city came to us once and made us very rich.” The man from Medina inquired, “How can this be? He came to you with nothing but a wool cloak on his back.” The man replied, “Oh, no. He didn’t make us rich with money. He taught us generosity, and we gave to one another until there were none of us who had any need.”

These are the Muslims. These are the Sufis. These are the believers. Anybody who is not like that is not a Muslim. Anybody who is not like that is not a Sufi. Can you imagine? You have a group of people; everybody has different amounts of money. Some have a lot; some have nothing. Then somebody teaches and inspires, until everyone gives to everyone, and everyone has what they need.

There is another story about al-Fudiyya. He would buy everything he needed from his neighbors who were vendors. Someone remarked that he would save money if he went down to the main market, because this was a side market. In the main market, you could barter a little better. This man over here wants to sell you some vegetables for such and such a price, you go to the guy next door. But in the side market, there is only one vegetable vendor, and he had to pay what was there. He said, “These vendors have come to our neighborhood to provide a service to us, so we should buy from them.” Now in the world we are living in is a thing about buying locally. That’s a good idea. When you have, immediately you have to be generous. If you are not, then all that you have has no value to it. It is said that if you start to build a *masjid*, Allah will finish it.

There is a story that Abudiyya was on the road and got very thirsty. He asked for water from a house along the way. A woman answered the door and filled his cup, but she stood behind the door and said, “Turn away from the door and send one of your servants to get the cup from me. I am an Arab woman, and my servant died some days ago.” She couldn’t send the servant out to give him the water, and it was improper for her to give it. He drank the water, and told his slave to take her 10,000 dirham. She said, “God forbid! Why do you make ridicule me?” So he said to his slave, “Take her 20,000 dirham.” She said, “Ask Allah Most High for good health!” Then he sent her 30,000 dirham, and at that she slammed the door and said, “Shame on you!” Then he sent her 50,000 dirham. By the end of the night, she had suitors lined up at the door, because she had acted in a proper way.

She wouldn't accept the money. She was giving to him because she had something to give, just water.

The other thing a Sufi learns is you seize the moment. It is said that bountifulness is acting on the first inclination you have to give. Don't think about it. If you have an inclination to give, then give. Don't rationalize it. These are the foundation principles we try to live by, *alhamdulillah*. I hope that we remember them, because we have to pay attention to the good in this world. They say that if you pay attention or keep the company of a stingy person, your heart becomes hard. This is why we have *suhbat*; you try to keep the company of good people.

There was a story about a man who was a spiritual man, an imam or a shaykh of some kind. He became ill, but no one came to see him. He just had his family and servant around him. He asked, "Why has no one come to see me?" He was told that it was because they were ashamed of the debts they owed to him, because he had lent a lot of money to people. "Oh, my God," he said. "Curse money because it keeps brothers from seeing one another!" And he sent a message that whoever owed him money was free of debt. That night, they say that the threshold of his house was broken from the weight of people who came to see him.

Well, you can look at it in two ways... but I'd rather think that the man realized that his sincere generosity people took as a debt, and kept away from him. So he made an even more generous gift by relieving them of the debt.

This reminds me of a story I tell sometimes of my own father. We get a glimpse of the character of people we know very well sometimes, and find out that we don't really know them so well. They are not exactly who we thought they were. It is said from Abu al-Jafar that you freely give when unasked, but begrudge any time anybody asks you for it. He said, "*I give money freely; but I am begrudging of my knowledge.*" When I was

about Hameed's age, I would go out. Life was different in those days. You could go out to dinner, see a movie, and then have some dessert, all for under ten dollars, maybe 5 dollars. I'd be going out at night, all dressed up with cufflinks, very dapper. I had a car in those days, a Ford Falcon the first year it came out. It was totally stripped down, and only had three forward gears, but it was my car—bright red. I learned to drive a stick shift in about three hours with my father screaming at me. We went to the high school parking lot and I burned out half a clutch, jumping around. I won't tell you what my father said, because I shouldn't repeat those kinds of words. But I didn't know what my name was by the end, because he was calling me all sorts of other kinds of names.

I'd be going out, all dressed up. I would tell the young lady I was going out with that we were going out to dinner and a movie. I was 17 years old, and a real brat. Then I'd have maybe two dollars in my pocket, but I needed ten dollars to put gas in the car. I'd go down the stairs, and my father would say, "Do you have money?" I'd say, "Yes," with my fingers crossed behind my back. "Are you sure?" "Yes." "Here, take ten dollars." "No, I don't need it!" *Taruf* was part of our family when I was a kid. "Take it! What's the matter? Is my money not good enough for you?" "No, Dad. Thank you very much." (Whew!)

On other occasions, I went downstairs and was nervous. I'd go up and down the stairs. My father would say, "What are you going up and down the stairs for?" "Oh, I forgot something." I'm waiting for him to say something, and he's not saying anything, and I don't have enough money to go out! I only had maybe a dollar or two. Even in those days, you couldn't do much with a dollar or two. I'd start to walk out the door, or I'd go out to the car and come back in. Finally, I'd say to my father, "Dad, can I borrow five dollars?" Oh, I would get such a lecture! "What, you think money grows on trees? Do you think that I don't work for this? Where's the money I gave you a week ago?" Oh, I would get such a lecture. I had to allow my father to be generous, to give him the time to be generous. If I asked him, I broke the rule. He was stringing me along the whole way.

He knew why I was going in and out. He'd say, "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree."

My father and mother eloped. This was 1931? 32? They didn't tell anyone. They got married by some judge, and then came back. My father took my mother to her house, and my father went back to his house. The next morning, he gets up and goes down to eat breakfast. My grandfather looks at him and I won't repeat his language either, because he was a good working man with a good command of English idioms. He said to my father, "Did you and Frances get married last night?" My father said, "What?!" "Did you go get married last night?" He said, "Yes, sir." "Then what the hell are you doing here?" "How did you know?" "You never would eat that food for breakfast, and now you are sitting here eating it." It came into my grandfather's mind this was what had happened. He said, "Go be with your wife." That was the story. My mother was seeing a judge at the time, and my father knew he had no chance unless he grabbed her when he could.

Generosity comes in many different forms. My father didn't know how he was going to support a wife. This was during the worst of the Great Depression. My father was working at the time down on Wall Street, while he was trying to go to Columbia University. People were jumping out of the buildings, killing themselves; he used to have to jump out of the way. He worked at a bank at night, and if they were so much as one cent off, they would have to stay until it was resolved. It was all done by hand, no computers, guys! He didn't know, but he was a generous man. What was the first thing they bought? Was it a bed? No. The first thing they bought was a piano. My father bought a piano for my mother because she was a concert pianist. That was the first thing, the piano that is in our house today. He wanted her to have that. Generosity comes in many different forms.

I told you stories about people you have no knowledge of, and about my own family. It comes, not just to people.

Imam al Jafar was at a big estate, a date palm orchard. There was a slave working there. When the slave brought out his food to eat, a dog came inside the wall. You know, Muslims don't love dogs. A dog came inside and the slave threw him a piece of bread. The slave kept throwing him the bread until it was all gone. Abdu Jafar said, "How much food do you receive each day from your master?" The slave said, "Just what you've seen, that's it." "Then why do you give it to a dog, rather than yourself?" The slave said, "There are no dogs living here. This one has come hungry. Look at him. He has traveled a great distance, so how can I turn him away?" "But how will you manage today with all the work you have to do?" The slave replied, "I'll spend today hungry." Abdul al Jafar said, "And I've been reproached for being too generous? This man is more generous than I am."

What did he do? He purchased the date palm orchard and freed the slave. Then what did he do? He gave the slave the orchard. These are our people. These are the Sufis. This is who you come from. This is our spiritual family. Everyone wants to know stories about their family. I've told you stories about my family, and you know stories about your own family. I'm telling you more stories about your family, the Sufis.

I read such terrible things on the Internet today about Prophet Muhammed (sal). Oho, the worst language you could hear. The worst of the worst things were said. This is the impression people have of these people in this country today. This is what they are saying, about the Arab-American girl who won the Miss America contest, terrible things about Allah, about the Prophet. You have a few people who have no knowledge about what I told you tonight. They have no knowledge about their history or about the goodness that they are supposed to represent. So they do very bad things. They break all

the rules of Islam and of humanity. They do it in the name of God, as has been done for millennia. Then people say the terrible things. So it's good to tell some good stories, *Inshallah. Asalaamu aleikum.*