

Yoga and Sufism

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QUESTION: What is Sufism and how is it related to Yoga?

ANSWER: Genuine Sufism is a form of Yoga which was introduced into the West from India and subsequently established itself in Muslim-dominated countries.

The Afghan-born scholar Idries Shah (1924-1996) is regarded by many as the foremost authority on Sufism. A prolific writer, several books of whom were designated "Book of the Year" by the BBC, Shah was responsible for many or most of the Sufi-related teachings circulating in the World today.

The main problem is that Westerners, in particular, who constitute the majority of consumers of Sufi literature, have very little knowledge of their own history and even less of the history of the East. Without such knowledge no proper understanding of historical events and their interconnection is possible.

In this context, it is imperative to understand that even among specialists with Western academic training there are very few - if any - who are experts on Yoga, Middle Eastern and Ancient Greek Spirituality, simultaneously. This results in important connections and clues being overlooked or misinterpreted.

We shall therefore attempt to present a view of Sufism which in our opinion is more complete, more culturally and historically accurate and, in consequence, closer to truth than the view formed in their mind by most readers of Sufi literature.

Points in common

We cannot here more than mention some key Sufi concepts such as that of God as Light, Intelligence, Consciousness, Truth (compare Yogic concepts of Samvid-Prakasha, Chit, Parama Satya); Pole, North Star (Pole Star), World Axis, Unseen Master (compare Skambha, Dhruva, Akshara); three Means of knowledge: direct perception, reason, tradition (compare Anubhava or Pratyaksha, Anumana and Agama or Shabda); the concept of a veil that envelops the unawakened Soul, preventing him from seeing the Truth (compare Maya).

Seven breaths or levels of consciousness (compare the Seven Chakras, Sthalas, Spheres or Worlds); the concept of "Friend" or Spiritual helper and guide (compare Bandhu); the concept of "Point" as an important device for the transmission of Spiritual teachings (compare Bindu or Vindu as a symbol of Shiva, the Supreme); the "Path of Blame" in which the seeker deliberately provokes and meekly bears other people's contempt and abuse towards his own person in order to purify himself and facilitate his Spiritual advancement (compare the Pashupata Vrata); the concept of human consciousness as a mirror-like substance which, when cleansed of impurities, regains its natural capacity to shine (compare Bimba or Vimva in Shvet. Up., etc.).

All of the above is present in the Scriptures of India (Puranas, Upanishads, Vedas, Pashupata Sutra, Yoga Sutra) and much of it has already been touched upon elsewhere on this Web site. What is of importance is that, on the basis of these

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common points, the close connection between Sufism and Yoga becomes obvious and undeniable.

The origin of Sufism

Sufi literature describes the Persian mystic **Mansur al-Hallaj** (10th century CE) as one of the greatest Sufi masters and the greatest martyr of the Sufis. Another Sufi mystic and philosopher was **Suhrawardi** (12th century). A third mystic and poet, **Jallaludin Rumi** (13th century), is similarly celebrated as a great disseminator of Sufi teachings.

The earliest of these three, Al-Hallaj was born into a Magian family. Now Magianism, the tradition of the Magi or Magicians, is the ancient, pre-Islamic religion of Persia (Iran) which is closely related to Yoga. Shiva, the Supreme Being of Yoga, is known as "the Greatest Magician" (Maha Mayin) from earliest times: "The origin of the World lies in the Magical Power of the Supreme Lord (Maheshvara)", says the Shvetashvatara Upanishad. Yogis themselves have always been regarded as powerful Magicians on account of their magic powers (Siddhis) resulting from Spiritual Practice.

Be that as it may, the fact is that al-Hallaj travelled to India in search of true Spiritual Knowledge where he received the Yogic teaching of the Unity of Man and God. Upon his return to Persia, he was sentenced to death by the Islamic authorities for spreading this teaching and died with the words: "O Lord! Let me be grateful for the gift which I received, for it has enabled me to see what others cannot see".

Suhrawardi of Aleppo (North Syria) openly declared in his writings that his teachings originated in the East. Indeed, his teachings of Illumination to the effect that the entire Universe is a manifestation of Divine Light, are found in the oldest of Indian scriptures where God is said to be Light (He is even known by several names denoting "Light": Dyaus, Deva, Maha Prakasha, etc.) and to have manifested the World out of Himself.

As for Rumi himself, Idries Shah dedicates to him an entire chapter entitled, "Our Master Jallaluddin Rumi". He was born in Balkh, in the former Hindu Kingdom of Afghanistan, which Idries Shah describes as a "bastion of ancient Wisdom teaching". His teacher was Sanai of Afghanistan. Rumi is not only regarded as one of the greatest mystics and poets of Sufism but also as founder of the "Dancing Derwishes". In his poems, Rumi says, "What shall I say, O Muslims? I am neither a Christian nor a Muslim; I have given up duality and seen the World as One." Also, "I looked into my heart and there I saw Him (God or Truth). He is nowhere else to be found". Clearly, he had followed the Yogic method of inward contemplation and developed the Vision of Universal Unity (Shiva Samadhi).

The following key Yogic teachings are found in the writings of these great Sufi Masters:

1. God is Light and Intelligence.
2. The human Soul, who originated in God undergoes a series of Reincarnations or repeated rebirths in various bodies until his final Liberation and Return to God.
3. The Highest Spiritual realisation is the Unity and Identity of the human Soul with God.

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4. This Supreme Realisation is to be achieved by means of inward contemplation or Meditation.

It is a well-known Sufi teaching - espoused by Rumi and others - that man at first worships all kinds of things; later he adopts a particular religion; and in the final stages of Spiritual development he no longer says which religion he follows or even whether he worships God at all: having recognised his own identity with God, he can hardly say, "I worship Myself"!

In consequence, we can expect no clearer indication that the great Sufi Masters were Yogis, than what was intimated above. Nor must we forget that from the 8th century onwards, Sufis operated in hostile and dangerous territory, under the repressive regimes of Islamic clerics, where they and their followers were often subjected to persecution and pogroms.

From Ancient India to Persia and beyond

There is no evidence for the existence of the word "Sufism" or "Tasawuf" in Arabic, prior to the 8th century CE. The word is clearly derived from the Greek "Theosophia" or "God-wisdom" and was adopted by Arabic-speakers at the same time as "Philosophia" was adopted as "Falsafa", soon after the Muslim Arab invasion of Persia in the 7th century.

Thus "Sufi" is nothing but the Arab version of Greek "Theosophist" or, short, "Sophist". Idries Shah himself uses the term "Theosophist" in his work "The Sufis". "There is no age in which there is no great 'Theosophist'", he declares.

Now the Sophists - whether we derive their name from "**Theosophists**" ("God-knowers", "Seekers after Divine Knowledge"), "**Philosophists**" ("Lovers of Wisdom", "Seekers after Truth") or simply "**Sophists**" (from "Sophos", "Wise Men") - were known in the Hellenistic World by the name of "Gnostics", from "Gnosis", "Knowledge".

Socrates, for example, must be admitted to have been not only a Philosopher but also a Theosophist and a Gnostic even though, in the materialist World of today, his teachings are officially presented as purely intellectual and moral in nature rather than Spiritual.

One of the salient characteristics of Socrates was his method of imparting wisdom by means of philosophical and logical debate. In this sense, he was also a Sophist, that is, one who was in possession of, and taught, wisdom ("sophia"). At any rate, he must be admitted to have been a "**Sophos**" or "**Wise Man**".

At any rate, the Greek word "Sophist" or "Gnostic" in the above sense is the exact translation of Sanskrit "Jnaani" or "Man of Higher Knowledge" (from "Jnaana", "Knowledge"), a title by which the Wise Men of India have been known from the time of the earliest Upanishads.

The Greek-derived name "Sufi" ("Sophist") was adopted by Persian and Arabic-speakers simply because Greek was the language of literature, science and Spiritual Wisdom in West Asia at that time.

The fact that no Arabic word existed to describe a philosopher, philosophist, theosophist or sophist, and the need was felt to introduce Greek-derived terminology, demonstrates the non-Arabic origin of both Philosophy (Falsafa) in general and Theosophy or Sufism (Tasawuf) in particular.

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The great reverence with which Sufis regarded the Ancient Masters of Greece, Persia and India is well-known. For example, the eminent Spanish-born Sufi philosopher Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), known as Averroes in the West, was a keen student of Greek (Aristotelian) thought. He famously declared that "Everything has been already perfectly examined by the ancients. All that is required of us is to go back to their books and see what they have said in this connection".

Now Ancient Greek and Persian Wisdom itself has much in common with its Indian counterpart. Indeed, as we shall presently demonstrate, it is mostly derived from the latter.

The erudite psychologist and scholar, Professor Carl G. Jung, who spent most of his life studying Western and Eastern mysticism, observed that "the Hellenistic syncretism of the third and fourth centuries showed traces of Indian thought (Apollonius of Tyana, Orphic-Pythagorean secret doctrines, the Gnosis, etc.)" (Psychology and Religion - Yoga and the West, published in Prabuddha Bharata, Calcutta 1936).

Close connections between Ancient Egyptian and Indian thought, in particular, psychology, have similarly been discerned by another great scholar, Joseph Campbell. However, as he correctly observes, "every line of Yogic literature betrays a depth of psychological insight surpassing anything of which we have knowledge from Egypt" (The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology, 1962). This lends itself to the conclusion that Ancient Egyptian thought has its roots in India, the land of philosophers and wisdom seekers (Jnanis) par excellence.

Nor is there any mystery regarding the ways in which such influence might have come about. Indian merchants, sailors, masons, metalworkers, artisans and storytellers contributed in many ways to the spread of Indian culture as, indeed, must have Indian slaves captured by the Arab Muslim armies who repeatedly attacked and invaded India following the rise of Islam.

The main channel for the transmission of Yogic teachings is, of course, that of oral instruction and secret initiations, which naturally leave little or no historical trace. However, another conduit that constitutes more palpable evidence is literary translations of Yogic texts.

The Story as a medium for Spiritual Instruction

The Sanskrit word "Kathaa" means "conversation", "discussion", "debate" as well as "tale" or "story". It derives from the root "Kath", "to declare", "inform", "explain", "describe", "show", "instruct", "order", "command". "Kathana" means "narration", "information", "oral instruction". A more technical term employed in Yoga is "Chummaa" or "Chommaa", that is, instructional aphorism or narrative designed to stimulate the seeker's intuition and facilitate his Spiritual development.

Animal fables and stories in general (Kathaas) are a timeless method for the transmission of both Spiritual and worldly wisdom ("Niti", "wise conduct of life") which is well-documented in India from earliest times to the present day (Upanishads, Puranas, Mahabharata, Ramayana, Pancha-Tantra, Simhasana Dvatrimshika, Hitopadesha, the stories of the Tantric and other Spiritual Masters (Nathas), the stories of Shri Ramakrishna, Ramana Maharshi, etc., etc.).

From a Yogic point of view, Spiritual stories are not, of course, meant to be consumed in the form of written collections but told directly by the Master (Guru) to the disciple (shishya, chela) at the appropriate time and in the appropriate context, as part of certain psychological and

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Spiritual processes. For this very reason, the vast majority of these stories must remain outside the domain of public knowledge.

The fact that such stories, even when they are recorded, are less publicised in the West than their "Sufi" counterparts does not mean to say that they do not exist or that they are in any way inferior or less enlightening than the latter. After all, Indian Spirituality has produced more Enlightened Souls than any other system on Earth!

Unfortunately, the advent of Islamic and Christian Colonialism in India, followed by Secular (anti-Spiritual) Socialism, has caused Indian Spirituality to lose the royal patronage it had enjoyed for millennia. Today, Genuine Yoga has to struggle against a rising tide of materialism while simultaneously lacking the support of both left-wing intelligentsia and oil-rich financiers enjoyed by the "Sufi" enterprise.

The millions of priceless ancient works (the official estimate is 5 million) slowly disintegrating away in dusty Indian libraries, temples and private homes without even being catalogued, edited, translated or published speak for themselves.

Nevertheless, we know on the basis of historical evidence that, "Kalila and Dimnah", a collection of fables and one of the earliest Arabic literary works, was translated in the 8th century by Ibn al-Muqaffa from a 6th century Persian work which in turn was a translation of a much earlier Sanskrit original, known as "Pancha-Tantra", written in about 100 BC by a learned South-Indian Brahman of the name Vishnusharman.

The Arabic translation of the "Pancha-Tantra" was subsequently translated into Greek, Latin and other Western languages. Similarly, the Sanskrit Yoga Sutra and Samkhya Sutra were translated into Persian and Arabic about the year 1000.

As another example, the celebrated fables of Aesop (4th-5th century BC) are generally regarded as "Greek" simply because they were written in that language. The truth of the matter, however, is that they were compiled in Asia Minor (Turkey or Persia) and could well be Indian in origin if we consider the following facts:

- 1.** India was the World's largest nation, indeed, infinitely larger than Greece, hence we may logically infer that her literary output was of similarly copious proportions in relation to that of Greece.
- 2.** The literary and philosophical achievements of Ancient Indian authors (Panini's Grammar, the Upanishads, etc.) remain unsurpassed by any other nation down to this day.
- 3.** The influence, economic, cultural and Spiritual, India has exercised on her neighbours to the East and West until her invasion and occupation in the Middle Ages by Islamic forces. Indeed, even when India had fallen under the control of British Colonial powers, her by then declining Spirituality was still capable of inspiring the thinking minds of the Western World (Arthur Schopenhauer, Victor Hugo, Rudolf Steiner, Annie Besant, William Blake, Helena Blavatsky, etc.).

It is quite natural for a civilisation of the calibre and magnitude of India to have exercised some influence on its neighbours. If Indian Spirituality had penetrated as far East as China, Indonesia,

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Cambodia, Vietnam, Mongolia and Japan, we may safely assume that some of this must have reached India's neighbours to the West, too.

A recent scientific study (published in "Antiquus", June-July 2005) has established the Indian origin of the medieval European tale of "Iosaphat". The original was the thousand-year old story of Lord Buddha's life. Hailing from North India (Nepal) the Buddha's (or Bodhisattva's) story was translated into Persian (as Bodisavi) in the 6th-7th century and subsequently into Arabic (Budhasaf, Yudasaf, 8th century), Greek (Ioasaph) Latin (Iosaphat) and other European languages.

Thus, by the time the story reached 11th century Europe, the Buddha/Bodhisattva - who taught that, **"From Yoga (or Meditation) arises Wisdom, therefore, let a man strive to increase his Wisdom" (Dhammapada 282)** - had become a Christian saint of the name Iosaphat!

If the Buddha was turned into a Christian by 11th century Europeans, he or his teachings could equally have been claimed by Persian or Arab "Sufis" at about the same time or even earlier. Be that as it may, while it is clear that Indian stories did not always survive in their original form, their Indian origin and adoption by Western nations - from Persia to Arabia and Europe - cannot be reasonably denied.

That Indian culture was well-known among the educated classes in the Islamic World, is evidenced by the writings of early Islamic authors. Thus Ibn Sina or Avicenna (980-1037), a prominent Persian philosopher and physician from Central Asia, relates in his autobiography that his own father and brother would often discuss Indian philosophy, geometry and arithmetic.

Ibn Sina's own teachings were largely based on the Yogic doctrine of the Universe as a reality emanated by God out of Himself by means of Soul, mind and body.

It is a matter of common knowledge that thousands of medieval Arabic works were based on earlier Greek manuscripts. What is less known or publicised is that many of these works refer to arithmetic as "Indian calculations" ("hisab al-Hindi") and what currently goes by the name of "Arabic numerals" was known to Arabs as "Indian figures" ("arqam al-Hind") which were **"created by Indian philosophers"**.

As Ibn Khaldun states in his "Muqqadimah" (written in 1390), "the Arabs first learned about science **from the Indians** along with their figures and methods of calculation, **in the year 776 CE (156 Hegira)**".

What is essential to observe here is that this transmission of Indian knowledge took place centuries before the time of Suhrawardi and Rumi and had plenty of time and scope to provide the cultural background necessary for the rise of "Sufism".

King Khosro Anushirvan and the secret of "Islamic culture"

The role of Persian culture in the spread of Eastern Spirituality to the West is well-known to historians. For example, the cult of the Indo-Persian Saviour God Mithra (the "Invincible Sun") enjoyed such popularity throughout the Roman Empire as to establish itself as the state religion by the second half of the 3rd century CE and retained that status until its replacement by

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Christianity. The role of Persia in the development of "Islamic culture", on the other hand, is less well-known. This is due partly to a general lack of interest in history, partly to a deliberate attempt by left-wing and Arabist historians to promote Islam as a unique phenomenon bordering on the mysterious and the miraculous. Knowledge of basic historical facts, however, will quickly debunk this myth.

An important figure in the history of Persian Spirituality is the Sassanid **King Khosro Anushirvan of Persia (531-579)**. Under his wise rule the city of **Gondeshapur** (southwestern Iran) became an important center of learning and home to many renowned physicians, philosophers and scientists. So great were King Khosro's tolerance and thirst of knowledge that the members of Plato's Athenian Academy sought refuge at his court when their school was closed by order of the Christian Emperor Justinian. During Khosro's reign the great physician and minister **Bozorgmehr (Burzoe)** was sent to India with the task of contacting the brightest minds of that country and make Indian wisdom available to the Persian people. One of Bozorgmehr's remarkable achievements was the translation of the famous Pancha-Tantra and other ancient texts from the original Sanskrit into Persian.

Incidentally, the Ancient Greek historian and geographer, Strabo, informs us that centuries before Bozorgmehr's journey to India, following Alexander the Great's conquest of Persia, an Indian Yogi (called Kalanos by the Greeks – after his custom of greeting people with the word "kalyana", "luck") was persuaded to accompany Alexander all the way to Persia. Apparently, it was Alexander's famous teacher, Aristotle himself, who had counselled him to make contact with Yogis during his expedition to India. Evidently, interest in Indian Wisdom had enjoyed a long tradition not only among the Persians but among the Ancient Greeks, too.

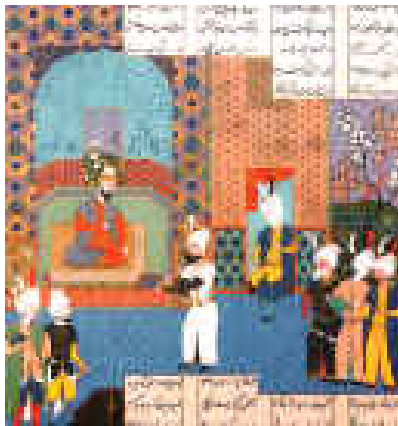


Illustration to the 10th century Shahnameh (Book of Kings) showing Bozorgmehr presenting the **Pancha-Tantra** to King Khosro of Persia upon his return from India

Unfortunately, the Muslim Arab invasion of Persia in 652 CE brought an abrupt end to the Sassanid Dynasty. Persian culture fell under the control of the new Arab rulers. Under Islamic rule, the cultural centres of Gondeshapur and other Persian cities were moved to Baghdad, the new Capital of the Islamic Empire or "Khilafat".

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Thus the Muslim ruler Kalif Mamun (813-833) founded his famous "House of Wisdom" at Baghdad for the "advancement of ancient lore". It was under the new Islamic regime that hundreds of Greek, Persian and Sanskrit works were translated into Arabic.

Although it has become fashionable in certain circles to interpret such wholesale adoption of ancient knowledge as an indication of Islamic tolerance, it is important to understand that all cultural activity under Islamic rule was in reality carefully monitored by the religious authorities. The fact is that, while hundreds of ancient works were indeed translated into Arabic, many more were not. Some were suppressed or destroyed and even those that were translated were often edited to suit Islamic beliefs about truth.

What is conveniently forgotten by pro-Islamic historians and their political allies is that most such translations were works on medicine, astronomy and science, while very few dealt with non-Islamic religion and culture. So much for "religious tolerance"!

Nor must we overlook the political motives behind this unprecedented translation movement. Had Islamic rulers sought to prohibit all non-Islamic knowledge, this would have resulted in a devastating uprising of the subjugated nations against Islamic occupation. The Muslim rulers were a small minority who could ill afford to provoke the anger of the enslaved nations. Also, their rudimentary nomadic culture could not match that of the subjugated locals. In consequence, their immediate concern, if they were to remain in power, was to establish control over the local cultures.

The translation of important, mainly scientific works into Arabic, therefore, served a dual purpose: (1) to convey the impression that Islam was a tolerant, sophisticated and knowledge-friendly religion (although, as we have shown, this tolerance was in practice highly selective) and (2) to gradually take over and control all non-Quranic knowledge. As soon as this was achieved, a cynical programme of systematic suppression and elimination of such knowledge began to be enforced by the Islamic authorities from the 11th century onwards.

Mathematics, logic, philosophy and other "Western sciences" were eventually rejected as non-Islamic. Schools teaching such subjects were closed down and teachers were persecuted, imprisoned or murdered in the same way as they had been, centuries earlier, in Christian-dominated Europe. Sufism itself was one of these foreign influences and was never fully accepted by the Islamic authorities except as a token of "religious tolerance". In the final analysis, therefore, far from showing true tolerance, Islam ruthlessly took over and used ancient knowledge and culture to promote its own dominance over other traditions.

Meanwhile, however, the fact is that Philosophy (Love of Wisdom) in general found its way into the Islamic world as "Falsafa" and the Yoga Sutra and Samkhya Sutra were translated into Arabic about 1000 CE, while traditional, instructional stories from India had long passed into Persian – and subsequently, Sufi – folklore.

This fact is important for a number of reasons. Had the Quran been capable of satisfying the Spiritual needs of the thinking men of Muslim-occupied Asia, there would have been no need for such translations. Evidently, they were translated into Persian and Arabic precisely because there was an interest in such works. And the interest in them could only have arisen if a more general knowledge of the teachings contained therein was already present among those nations.

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The above also demonstrates that Spiritual knowledge reached the world of Islam not by any supernatural means as many bogus "Sufis" claim but by historically documented, conventional channels of communication. In short, these facts alone are sufficient to explain many of the developments in the Arabic and Persian speaking world, including the appearance of Sufism or "Tasawuf". What is relevant to the purposes of the present discussion is that much of the knowledge conveyed to the Islamic world via Persia was evidently of **Indian** origin.

The "Simurgh in China"

Yogic influence on Sufism, in particular, is nowhere better illustrated than in a Sufi story. In his work, "The Sufis", Idries Shah informs us that, "the '**Simurgh**' [a mythical bird] is a code-word for the development of Consciousness by means of '**China**'. "Search after Truth, be it even in China", is a sentence that every Sufi has on his lips, tells us Shah. In support of this, the following passage is given from "The Parliament of Birds" by Attar (1150-1229): "The Simurgh appeared once, out of the darkness, in China"... "Therefore, it is said that one must look for Wisdom even in China".

Now Spiritual enigmas and riddles have been used in India from Vedic times (see Rig Veda, I, 164; I, 152,3; Atharva Veda, VII, 1; XI, 8, 10, etc.). The use of secret language ("Sandhaa-bhaashaa") as well as coded poems and songs as an integral part of Spiritual Practice (Saadhana) has been known to Yogis from times immemorial. Sufism, therefore, can teach us little about "code-words" symbolic of Spiritual realities.

So, let us briefly analyse Attar's story from a Yogic perspective which, as will presently become apparent, is more complete and therefore clearer. Thus we may derive both the Arabic word "Syn" and Persian "Chyn" from the Sanskrit word "China" (pronounced as "cheena") which is only natural if we consider that India is closer to China than either Persia or Arabia and, therefore, Indians would have been the first users of that name.

Moreover, the Sanskrit word "China" may, for Spiritual purposes, be etymologically derived from "Chi" (Chee) which in turn comes from the verbal root "Ki", "to observe", "perceive", "fix the gaze or concentrate upon", "seek for", "investigate", "search through", "enquire". In consequence, it may be treated as synonymous with "Chintana", that is, "thought", "reflection", "consideration", "contemplation", "meditation", as well as with "Chit", "consciousness", "intelligence", "wisdom", a derivation which it does not have in Persian or Arabic.

To better understand the rich Spiritual symbolism of this Sanskrit term we need only mention the famous "Chintaamani" of the Mahabharata and other Scriptures, the "wish-fulfilling jewel" or "thought-gem", a mythical precious stone said to yield its possessor all desires.

In Yoga, Chin-Mudra, the "Mystical Seal of Awareness" is a hand gesture used in rituals and secret initiations. "China" or "Chinaachara" (China-method) itself has the additional meaning of a certain tantric ritual - also known as "Pancha Makara" ("The Five M's") - designed to bring about Spiritual Awakening in the initiates.

As for the Simurgh itself, "murgh" simply means "bird". Mythical birds symbolic of Enlightenment represent a well-documented theme in Indian Spiritual texts from the times of the Vedas and the Upanishads.

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In keeping with this timeless tradition, the renowned Yoga Master of the 10th century, Utpaladeva of Kashmir, compares the Divine Self that appears out of the initial darkness of meditation - which is nothing but a conscious entrance into the depths of one's unconscious - with precisely such a mythical bird: "Hail to You! Most Excellent Swan gliding through the skies of your devotees' minds"... "May my unswerving devotion nourish me with the sweet essence of Your Bliss so that I may grow into a bird with mighty wings!" (Shiva StotraVali (14:19 and 7:4).

In the "**Stavachintaamani**" (note the word "**chin**" in the title) another great Yogi and poet, Bhatta Narayana (9th century), sings: "Obeisance to the Source of Supreme Peace (Shiva), the Great Swan Whose Body shines due to its excessive whiteness and Whose Unique Abode is the purified heart of the Enlightened Ones!"

The symbolism of this mythical bird pervades all levels of Indian culture. Thus, according to an ancient belief, already found in the Shukla Yajur Veda, the swan has the ability of extracting milk from a mixture of milk and water and drink it. Indeed, among other things, swans are capable of the astonishing feat of extracting salt from sea water and expel it through their nostrils. In Spiritual terms this symbolises the ability to distinguish between Truth and un-Truth. The title of "Swan" also designates a class of Yogis who have attained a state of detachment and freedom from material desires.

It is beyond dispute that the Indian motif of the mythical (and mystical) bird is as ancient as it is rich in Spiritual symbolism. Suffice it here to add that the Sanskrit word "Hamsa", "Swan", especially in its inverted form "Sa-Ham" means "I am He" (or, as al-Ghazali put it, "I am the Truth"), a mystic chant used by many Yogis in their meditations.

Nor must we assume that the mythical bird symbolic of Enlightenment must be a swan. Among other mythical birds with deep roots in Indian culture and religion we may enumerate the following: the **Indian Cuckoo or Kokkila** (a symbol of Spring and regeneration of life), the **Chaataka Bird** (a kind of cuckoo said to drink water straight from the clouds) and the **Peacock (Mayura)**.

A truly magnificent bird, the Peacock not only is native to the wood and bush lands of India but has been a sacred symbol of divinity and immortality for millennia. In line with this age-old tradition, the Yogic posture "Mayuraasana" (Peacock-posture) is credited with rendering the human body strong and long-lived.

In the tradition of Shiva, the Lord is known as "the Blue-throated One" (Nila-Kantha) on account of His throat turning blue on the occasion of His swallowing the poison of ignorance from the Primeval Ocean in order to save the World. The peacock, which also has a blue neck, is similarly credited with being capable of eating and digesting poison as well as being immune to snake bites. Indeed, it is said to eat snakes.

According to Buddhist Scriptures (Jatakas), the Buddha himself is said to have lived as a pious peacock in a former life, and the same texts mention the belief that the eating of peacock flesh renders one immortal. Last but not least, the famous Indian Maurya Empire (321-185 BC) was named after the peacock (mayura).

At all events, the Indian (South-Asian) peacock must be regarded as the original prototype for the fabulous bird encountered in many mythologies from that of Ancient Greece (Phoenix) to

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China (Feng or Feng-huang). Indeed, medieval Persian illustrations of the "Simurgh" seem to indicate that it was - at least to the artist's mind - a peacock-like creature.

The peacock in the Indian tradition is said to dance at the approach of rain. Similarly, the Persian "Simurgh" is said to live near water. Water, in Yoga, symbolises Life due to its life-giving properties; it symbolises Consciousness because it has the capacity to reflect light; it symbolises entrance into deeper states of consciousness; and it stands for a Higher Reality because it falls from heaven. Water, therefore, is one of the factors linking the Peacock with the "Simurgh" (and, for that matter, with the Swan, which is a water-bird).

Another important fact that appears to have escaped the expert eye of Western scholars and "specialists" is that Persian "Murgh" and Sanskrit "Mayura" are, linguistically speaking, closely related, sharing as they do the primary component elements "m", "u" and "r".

Furthermore, the peacock in India is sacred to the God Murugan - a manifestation of Lord Shiva, the Supreme Being - whose name is even closer to Persian "Murgh". On analysis, therefore, it becomes evident that the two traditions are identical in their essential aspects, the Indian one clearly preceding its "Sufi" counterpart.

It follows from the above that, while the assertion to the effect that "Wisdom, Truth or God must be searched even in China" makes poor sense in Arabic, Persian or even English, it becomes perfectly clear in Sanskrit: **"Wisdom arises from Meditation. Therefore look for Wisdom in Meditation"**.

Or, as Scripture puts it: "The Supreme is to be attained by means of Chintaa or inward contemplation" (Maitrayana Upanishad). Indeed, this is the interpretation offered by Shah himself: **"China in both Persian and Arabic is a code-word for the Meditation System and the Sufi teaching method"**, he declares. Now we know why!

Another problem or series of problems that arises here is, Why can Idries Shah not talk plain language but has to resort to such convoluted devices as the Simurgh-in-China story? Why does Shah ignore the Sanskrit root "Chin" which, as the scholar that he was, he ought to have been aware of? If - as Shah himself admits - great Theosophists have existed at all times and in all countries, why does he systematically exclude Indian Theosophists or Yogis, from his study of Sufism? Could it be that he deliberately sought to suppress the evidence of the Indian origin of Sufism?

The fact is that, simultaneously running with the hare and hunting with the hunter is a common enough approach to sensitive issues, especially in the East. The overall impression is that Idries Shah is attempting to appease the Arabist camp consisting of Islamic fundamentalists and Arab nationalists by associating Sufism with Arabic "code-words" while ignoring its obvious Indian connections.

At the same time, however, in his exposition of Sufi teachings, Shah consciously or unconsciously suggests to the reflective reader that Truth is to be found in the Yogic practice of Meditation - as we have just demonstrated in our analysis of the Simurgh-in-China tale.

Indeed, even on the assumption that Shah was innocent of any anti-Indian agenda, he couldn't have given any more credit to Indian Spirituality than he did. To openly admit the Yogic nature

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and origin of Sufism, in the repressive World of Islam, would have amounted to signing one's own death sentence.

Being suspected of promoting "un-Islamic teachings" would mean the end of one's career, public image and, possibly, life. For this very reason, Sufism has had to be disguised as something else from the very beginning of the Islamic era.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the teachings of Indian Yogis are essentially identical to those of Sufis living and teaching in Islamic countries from the 8th century onwards. However, while Sufis in the Islamic World have often been persecuted and even murdered or publicly executed by the Islamic authorities (as in the case of al-Ghazali, Suhrawardi, etc.), the Yogis of India not only have formed an integral part of the national culture but have been held in the highest esteem by the entire population from times beyond memory.

In the light of these facts it is difficult to see how Sufism can be described as "Islamic". Rather, the probability is that it originated outside Islamic culture, namely, in India and therefore constitutes a fundamental aspect of Indian culture and Spirituality, while being merely tolerated, and often openly opposed, in the Islamic World.

Historical evidence from the edicts of Emperor Ashoka to the writings of Ancient Greek and Roman historians demonstrates the presence of Indian Spiritual teachers in the Middle East at least from the 3rd century BC onwards. The teachings of Greek philosophers of the 3rd and 4th centuries CE, as well as the translation of literary and philosophical Sanskrit texts into Persian and Arabic from the 6th to the 11th centuries, indicates the continuity of Indian Spirituality in the region well into the Islamic era - for over twenty centuries in total.

It is our firm conviction, based on extensive research on the subject-matter, that Sufis were originally Yogis who were forced to disguise themselves as Muslims in order to counteract the excesses of radical Islam and continue the teaching activities they for centuries had carried out in the region. This is the true explanation to the deliberate mystery in which Sufis have always shrouded themselves.

However, the circumstances that forced this excessive secrecy upon Sufi activities arose long before the advent of modern information technology. Modern methods of communication such as the Internet mean that the disguise of Sufism as "Islamic Mysticism" is no longer possible. Nor is it commendable, not least because it enables bogus "Sufi Masters" to employ Sufi teachings as a means of converting unsuspecting seekers to Islam. Worse still, it may be used to undermine and subvert Indian Spirituality itself, by presenting "Sufism" as superior to genuine Yoga. Indeed, our investigations of over thirty years have revealed that almost without exception Sufi teachings in India and elsewhere are being misused precisely in this manner.

What becomes evident is that this policy of secrecy, though justified in the past, ultimately goes against the true purpose of Sufism and all true Spirituality which is to bring seekers away from the repressive practices of established religion. After all, over a millennium of "Islamic Mysticism" has done little to improve the situation of millions of Persians, Arabs, Egyptians, Berbers, Indonesians and other Muslim-dominated nations.

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The only way forward, therefore, is to speak the truth in plain language and explain it again and again until it has been properly understood, and defend it by all possible means against the anti-Spiritual forces of state-sponsored beliefs. In the free and democratic World of today, religious fundamentalism, whether Islamic, Christian or otherwise, cannot be tolerated in any form or shape.

The fact is that the great martyrs of Sufism did not die preaching the Bible or Quran. They laid down their lives defending the Yogic Truth of Spiritual Liberation and Unity with God. From a Yogic perspective, to abandon the Supreme Eternal Law of Unity (Sanatana Dharma) and convert to Islam and other Western faiths which are nothing but misguided deviations and countercurrents to the Eternal Truth of Heaven, not only constitutes a clear symptom of Spiritual degeneracy but also a grave insult to the sacred memory of the Ancient Masters.

The celebrated Saint and Prophet of Sikhism, Guru Nanak (1469-1539), was a tireless seeker of truth who took great pains to visit the Islamic holy cities of Mecca and Medina that he might see for himself what Islam was about. In his devotional songs, Sufis are denounced for deriving a living from donations and craving wealth and power instead of seeking knowledge of God. Sufi Masters are exposed as impostors the true intention of whom was to convert Hindus to Islam, while Hindus themselves are derided for studying the Quran to please their Muslim Masters.

Among the most notorious "Sufi Masters" we may mention Moinuddin Chisti (1141-1236), a Persian-born Shia Muslim adventurer who settled down in India (at Ajmer) where he founded a "Sufi School" for the purpose of converting Hindus to Islam under the guise of "Sufi Spirituality".

It is quite clear that the fraudulence of bogus "Sufi Masters" has been common knowledge among true men of Spirit for centuries and it is beyond doubt that "Islamic Sufism", in particular, is a thinly-veiled deception. Sufism can only qualify as genuine if and to the extent that it unequivocally acknowledges Yoga as the Supreme Spirituality of Unity with the Divine. The adherents of any other kind of "Sufism" must be aware that their beliefs, teachings or practices constitute a serious transgression against the Spiritual Laws of the Universe and will not remain without consequence in this World or the next.

The following are some points worthy of consideration by all true seekers:

- It must be beyond dispute that the original and true Sufis were and are Yogis.
- In oppressive, Muslim-occupied countries where the teachings of Yoga are repressed by the authorities, authentic Sufism is indispensable for pointing genuine seekers to the True Faith (that is, Yoga or Unity with the Supreme), without arousing the suspicion of the said authorities. For this reason, Sufism in such countries has assumed the appearance of an Islamic or Islam-based Spiritual movement.
- By contrast, in non-Muslim countries, Sufism is perfectly unnecessary as Seekers can directly turn to the undiluted teachings of Yoga itself, the True Spirituality which was revealed to the World by the Supreme Being at the beginning of time.
- In the light of these facts, the question that discerning seekers outside repressive Muslim countries must ask themselves is, "what is Sufism doing in a country where the

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- teachings of Yoga are freely available?" The only rational answer is that "Sufi" enterprises in non-Islamic countries like India, for example, are plainly an offshoot of the global effort to convert Mankind to Islam.
- As most of the generally available information on Sufism derives from books, students of Spirituality must ensure that they know who the author of a particular work is and what his motives in writing it are, before giving any credence to the information offered in such works.
 - The authors of literature promoting "Sufism" outside Islamic countries may be classified into three main groups: 1) left-wing intellectuals who are in the business of promoting anything that helps to subvert and erode the established social, political and religious order, 2) Islamic fundamentalists who misuse Sufi teachings for the purpose of converting readers to Islam and 3) misguided souls who have failed to properly digest and assimilate the authentic history and function of Sufism.
 - The original and authentic Sufi Masters had the highest regard for pre-Islamic traditions such as Yoga, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and Paganism.
 - Authors of propaganda literature on Sufism, on the other hand, habitually denigrate non-Islamic faiths, in particular, Yoga and Hinduism.
 - One of the standard stratagems adopted by the "Sufi" camp when confronted with the facts of Spiritual teachings found in Hindu Scriptures, is to assert that such texts are not as old as people think. It may be observed in answer to this that, even if we leave Scriptures aside, the archaeological evidence still proves that Buddhism alone goes back a thousand years before Islam, not to mention Hinduism which reaches back millennia before even Buddhism! Secondary sources, such as the writings of the Greek geographer and historian Strabo as well as the works of early Christian authors, further support the great continuity and antiquity of Indian thought which is thus indisputable.
 - Another sure indication that a "Sufi" author or teacher is disingenuous is the frequent use of Arabic expressions, technical terms and "code-words" which are said to describe Spiritual concepts. The discerning student must ask himself, "why Arabic"? **Sufism is not an Arab tradition but one which arose in Persia.** The primary languages of Spiritual teaching in the area were Greek, Aramaic and Persian. The language of Sufi Masters like Suhrawardi, Rumi and al-Hallaj was not Arabic but Persian, a language closely related to or even derived from, Sanskrit, the classical language of India which for millennia has served as a medium for Spiritual communication. It is not by coincidence that Sufi saints and masters are known by the Persian word "**Pir**" and that even the Quran refers to Paradise by the Persian-derived word "**Al-Firdaws**". By contrast, Arabic was the language of Muslim invaders from the south. To portray Arabic as the language of Sufism is a blatant distortion of facts which must be identified and condemned as a deplorable form of Islamic cultural imperialism.
 - Sufi tales often found in such literature may be entertaining, but really serve the purpose of gently separating the reader from his familiar patterns of reason and render him susceptible to an uncritical acceptance of teachings the Islamic character of which the reader may be unaware of until it is too late for him to distance himself from such teachings. Alternatively, those who are too Spiritually advanced to fall into the trap of

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Islam, but not evolved enough to directly discern the True Faith, may develop a psychological dependency on such stories and find themselves incapable of advancing on the Spiritual Path. Such individuals may lose their way until they find true Spiritual Guidance in the form of an authentic Yoga Master.

- Those who desire to become involved with Sufism out of curiosity or other psychological reasons must consider that Spiritually as well as historically speaking, **Yoga precedes Sufism**. In the same way as countries or nations are better understood by studying their history, Sufism is best understood by studying Yoga first. As the great Sufi Averroes (Ibn Rushd) has said, "Everything has been perfectly examined by the ancient Masters. All we have to do is to go back to their books". Let the sincere student, therefore, first study the writings of the Ancient Yoga Masters who were the true Sufis and then worry about modern literature on the subject, if need be.
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