

***Tasawwuf* and the Rifa‘iyyah Order**

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Tasawwuf or Sufism is the spiritual path of Islam, a path which links a servant to his Lord. It is not, as many would like to believe, one of the many ‘isms’ of the Islamic world, nor is it the kind of esotericism or spirituality, as many others would like to believe, which is so often divorced from external forms. It, rather, is so harmoniously fused with the exoteric teachings of Islam (the *Shari‘ah*) that both work in a complementary fashion; so much so, that the one without the other would lose all meaning.

The last few decades have seen a consistent rise in the works dedicated to the study of *Tasawwuf*, its origin, development and impact with the result that one could hardly venture to say anything excitingly new about it. What needs to be emphasized, however, even if it runs the risk of simply repeating an all too well known fact, is the ethical character that pervades the whole of *Tasawwuf*. Imam Qushayri (d.465 AH) for instance, narrates on the authority of Al-Kittani (d.322AH)

Sufism is moral conduct; He who improves his moral conduct further, advances in his *tasawwuf*. (‘Abd al-Karim al-Qushayri, *Al-Risalah Al-Qushayriyyah*)

The whole thrust of upholding moral conduct is the realization of peace (*salam* from the root س,ل,م); peace with oneself i.e., with ones body, mind and spirit, with ones neighbours, ones community, ones society and peace with humanity at large. This also happens to be the very objective of Islam, the final and unblemished revelation of Allah for humanity. Consequently, it may safely be conjectured that *Tasawwuf* is the very heart and soul of Islam.

When Sufis talk about Islam, they make mention of its three-fold division, *shari‘ah* (the Islamic Law), *tariqah* (the spiritual path) and *haqiqah* (the truth). By *shari‘ah* they mean the main road and by *tariqah* the path branching from the main road which the *salik* takes. This implies two things; first, that the spiritual path *tariqah* in Islam is a mere derivative of the main road, i.e. the *shari‘ah*, meaning thereby that spirituality is of no consequence if it deviates from the *shari‘ah*; secondly, that it is only the adept who take to this path of *tariqah* because it is difficult and requires much toll and labour. Shaykh ‘Ali al-Hajwiri has concisely defined this toll and labour by stating that anyone who wishes to step into the *tariqah* should see if he is ready for three things:

- 1- to serve people
- 2- to serve Allah
- 3- to know how to guard his own heart. (See his *Kashf al-Mahjub*).

As in all normal human circumstances, treading on a difficult path requires not only guidance, rather, someone to act as a guide. *Tasawwuf* is no exception to the rule. It requires a *Shaykh*, *pir* or spiritual master who would guide the *murid* through its inexhaustible labyrinths. Since Sufis trace the origin of *tasawwuf* to the Qur’an and the person of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) himself, no guide is better than the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and no way better than his way. The four pronged duty of the Prophet (peace

and blessings of Allah be upon him) as mentioned in the following *ayah* of the Qur'an was:

Surely Allah conferred a great favour on the believers when He raised from among them a Messenger to recite to them His Signs, and to purify them, and to teach them the Book and Wisdom. (Al 'Imran: 164).

While Muslims have tried imitating the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in his deeds and it was virtually impossible to imitate the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) with all his dimensions, various Muslim groups started excelling in one or the other dimension and the disciplines associated with that dimension. So, the Jurists for instance excelled in *fiqhi* issues, the Muhaddithin in *hadith*, the Mutakallimin in *'aqidah* and the Mufasssirin in the exegesis of the Qur'an. It came to the lot of Sufis to guide the Muslim *ummah* on the purification aspect. As each group developed into full-fledged schools over a period of time, with their own men, distinctive features, principles and issues, so with the Sufis. Various spiritual masters from among the *Sahabah* (such as Sayyiduna Abu Bakr [d. 13 AH], Sayyiduna Salman al-Farisi, Sayyiduna 'Ali bin Abi Talib [d. 40 AH] and Sayyiduna Abu Hurayray *Radi Allahu 'Anhum*) were followed by the *tabi'un* (such as al-Hasan al-Basri [d. 110 AH], 'Ali Zayd al-'Abidin [d. 95 AH]) who were in turn followed by the a multitude of *tabi' al-tabi'in* (such as Fudayl bin 'Iyad [d. 187 AH], Ibrahim bin Adham [d. 165 AH], Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq [d. 148], Shaiq al-Balkhi [d. 194 AH] and Rabi'ah al-'Adawiyyah [d.185 AH] to name just a few).

The second century hijri in particular saw the rise of various spiritual schools or *madaris* as they were called; the schools of Khurasan, Baghdad, Basra, Kufa and Sham were quite popular and boasted the presence of great scholars and spiritualists at the same time of the calibre of Fudayl bin 'Iyad and 'Abd Allah bin Mubarak. Shaykh 'Ali al-Hajwiri, in his *Kashf al-Mahjub*, has mentioned 10 *tariqas* in the same period each with its men, principles and distinctive characteristics. By the beginning of the third century hijri, *tasawwuf* was becoming institutionalized and the contours of various Sufi orders had started emerging.

As mentioned earlier, the spiritual path may only be traversed with the help of a Shaykh. Without him, there is the danger of falling into all kinds of dangers and pitfalls and being distracted by temptations which assail all who take to the spiritual journey. This is why the Sufis forthrightly say that "he who does not have a Shaykh to guide him, Satan is his guide." As the Shaykh is connected to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) through the chain of initiation (*silsilah*), it is through this chain that the *barakah* of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) comes down to the *murid*. Seyyed Hossein Nasr has vividly depicted the function of the spiritual master in the following way:

"Being connected himself through the chain of initiation (*silsilah*) to the Prophet and to the function of initiation (*wilayah*) inherent in the prophetic mission itself, the Sufi master is able to deliver man from the narrow confines of the material world into the illimitable luminous space of spiritual life...To behold the perfect master is to regain the ecstasy of joy of the spring of life and to be separated from the master is to experience the sorrow of old age...To become initiated into a Sufi order and to accept the discipleship of a master is to enter into a bond that is permanent, surviving even death." (Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays*).

One of the primary functions of the Shaykh is ensuring that the *murid* is in a state of continuous remembrance of Allah (*dhikr*). In Islam the greatest sin is that of forgetfulness (*al-ghaflah*) and the purpose of the revelation of the message of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is to enable man to remember. That is why one of the names of the Qur'an itself is 'Remembrance of Allah' (*Dhikr Allah*) and why the ultimate end and purpose of all Islamic rites and all Islamic conjunctions is remembrance of Allah. The word *dhikr* with its various derivatives occurs (such as *dhikra*, *tadhkirah*, *tadhakkur*) more than 250 times in the Qur'an. Sufis when talking about the importance of *dhikr* take their cue from many *ayat* of the Qur'an such as:

Surely in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and in the alternation of night and day, there are Signs for people of understanding — those who remember Allah while standing, sitting or (reclining) on their backs, and reflect in the creation of the heavens and the earth, (saying): "Our Lord! You have not created this in vain. (Al 'Imran: 190-191).

So remember Me and I shall remember you; give thanks to Me and do not be ungrateful to Me for My favours. (al-Baqarah: 152).

I am Allah. There is no god beside Me. So serve Me and establish Prayers to remember Me. (Taha 14).

But whosoever turns away from this Admonition from Me shall have a straitened life; We shall raise him blind on the Day of Resurrection," (Taha 124).

He who is negligent to remember the Merciful One, to him We assign a Satan as his boon companion. (Al-Zukhruf: 36).

The word *dhikr* has three basic senses: mentioning, remembering and reminding. To mention something with the tongue is to recall it to the mind, to remember it. And if others are present when you mention something and they already know something about it, they are reminded of it. The English word remembrance also means "an act of recalling to mind" as well as "reminder."

These three senses of *dhikr* are inseparably bound together. God sends the prophet in order to remind people of the Covenant of *Alast*. They do so by reciting God's signs and mentioning their debt to him. People should respond to the prophets by remembering God, an act which demands that they mention him in prayers of glorification and praise. Those who respond in this manner are the people of faith, since to have faith is to recognize or remember the truth of *tawhid* in the heart, to mention it with the tongue and to put it into practice by following the instructions brought by the prophets. (William Chittick and Sachiko Murata, *The Vision of Islam*).

Numerous *ahadith* of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) relate the psychological impact of *dhikr* in our everyday lives. Take for example the following *hadith*.

Once when prisoners of war were being distributed in Madinah, Sayyidah Fatimah thought she should ask the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah

be upon him) for a maid as well since she used to get extremely tired from work. She sent Sayyidina 'Ali but every time he went to make this request to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), he felt shy and returned. Sayyidah Fatimah went herself and requested the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to provide her with a maid. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) asked her to recite *Subhan Allah, Alhamdu li Allah* and *Allahu Akbar* 33 times each and said that she wouldn't feel tiredness after that.

Scientific research has produced extra ordinary and rewarding results as far as *dhikr* is concerned. This is of course not to say that science ought to guide our ways but it certainly can be used as an additional tool to prove the veracity of a certain concept. So the Shaykh is not only a spiritual doctor for the *murid* who assists in curing his spiritual vices, rather keeping his injunctions brings several forms of physical pleasure and easiness in life as well.

In response to the many functions of the Shaykh and his status, the *murid* is required to practice the greatest caution and propriety (*adab*) with the Shaykh. He or she is also supposed to imagine the continuous spiritual presence of the Shaykh often called *tawajjuh*. Although some scholars have scoffed at this attitude on the part of the *murid*, Sufis take their cue from an incident which has authentically been narrated in many books of *hadith* in which the *Sahabah* complained to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that they feared that they had become hypocrites because when they are with him, it was as if they behold paradise and hell. However, when they return to their homes, wives and children they forget everything. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) brushed away any signs of hypocrisy in this change of state and comforted them saying that change of states is nothing to worry about. He added, however, that if they continued to sense, in the midst of their wives and children, the same state which they sensed in his presence, then angels would shake hands with them even on their beds. (*Sahih Muslim*, Bab Dawam al-Dhikr wa al-Fikr and *Musnad Ahmad*, Bab Hanzalah al-Katib Radi Allahu 'Anhu).

For Sufis, this *hadith* is a clear exhortation that the feeling of the spiritual presence of the Shaykh is necessary if one is to ensure a safe passage in his spiritual journey.

So far we have only talked about the individual aspect of *tasawwuf*. Through the individual *tasawwuf* has played a tremendous role in the changing of the society. In fact, if only one single factor were to be mentioned which contributed to the phenomenal spread of Islam, it would undoubtedly be *tasawwuf*. From the extreme borders of Indonesian islands to the eastern most borders of Morocco, Islam was introduced primarily at the hands of the Sufis.

As mentioned earlier, Sufis consider service to God's creatures one of their primary functions. "Whoever excuses himself from the service of his brethren, God will give him a humiliation from which he cannot be rescued," wrote 'Abd al-Rahman Jami in his *Nafahat al-Uns*.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "*Al-Mu'min mir'at al-Mu'min.*" this as pointed out by Anne Marie Schimmel in her *Mystical*

Dimensions of Islam is out forms the basis of social intercourse for a Sufi. “They see in the behavior and actions of their companions the reflection of their own feelings and deeds. When the Sufi sees a fault in his neighbor, he should correct this very fault in himself; this the mirror of his heart becomes increasingly pure. It was such teachings of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) that the Sufis held on to and then extended them not only to their brothers of the same order, rather to the whole of humanity. This development brought Sufism from the way of a spiritual elite to the masses. Added to that were of course the several anecdotes of miracles and extra ordinary occurrences which increasingly became the hallmark of great spiritual leaders, sometimes true more often not.

As time passed, it became necessary that *khanqahs* or *zawiyas* be introduced to house initiates and cater for their everyday needs including education. Slowly travellers, beggars, the poor and destitute realized that here was a place where they could find refuge in a dark night or food when hunger pestered them. These *khanqahs* went on to become cultural and theological centres ‘to be subsidized by governments or endowed by influential benefactors’. Normally each *khanqah* would have small rooms (*khalwas*) around a central courtyard for the *muridin*, a kitchen, rooms for travellers, bath-houses, a mosque and sometimes a school. The tomb of the founder of that order or *ta’ifah* would be in the middle of the courtyard. One might as well call it a miniature scale city. In many cases, many of the *muridin* worked as farmers or tended animals to generate some sort of income for these *khanqahs*. In other cases, rich endowments were regularly made by the rich or even the sultan and kept these *khanqahs* functioning. In traditional times, religious life with all its variances revolved more or less around these *khanqahs*, or *zawiyas*.

In addition to the socio-religious reforms that were achieved by the Sufis, there is another aspect of *tasawwuf* which has been present ever since the beginnings of Sufi orders, but whose importance in the academic world has only been recently recognized. That is the role which Sufis played in establishing various guilds and crafts (tanners, cobblers, weavers, blacksmiths and many more) or *futuwwah* or *asnaf* (singular, *sinf*) as was popularly known in the traditional Islamic society. Unfortunately, this role of the Sufis hardly receives any mention and is in fact a revelation for many contemporaries for a number of reasons. Primarily, of course, that colonial powers did away with or simply diluted many guilds in the Islamic world accompanied by the dismantling of *Awqaf* which worked very closely with the guilds and provided funds for them. Secondly, that modern Islamic renaissance and puritanical movements have assisted in underplaying the role of *tasawwuf* in the Muslim society thereby unfurling their own banners and providing the *raison d’etre* for their own activities.

Anyhow, without going into the details of how the role of *tasawwuf* in these guilds was downplayed, what needs to be pointed out is that in most cases the hierarchy of many of these guilds was established on exactly the same pattern as that of the Sufi *tariqahs*. There was a hierarchical system which was followed starting from the novice (*murid* in *tasawwuf*) and ending with the *pir* or Shaykh. Although most of the guilds were funded from domestic resources of the society or donations from philanthropists, some of them, with the passage of time, became state sponsored. The simple reason for that was:

- 1- The guilds had the trust of the general populace as they provided not only jobs to many, rather, they catered for the immediate needs, such as food

and shelter, of the traveller, the poor and the destitute. As mentioned earlier the *khanqahs* were doing exactly the same job. There should be little wonder then, that many of these guilds were in fact situated within the precincts of the *khanqahs* and *zawiyas*.

- 2- Guilds were also the quickest access to the public. Whenever the state wanted to get a message across to the public or feel its mood, it was these guilds that came in handy.
- 3- Many of these guilds provided military training to their initiates or novices. This military training was always required since there was imminent danger of being attacked by aggressive neighbours or mischief mongers. Thus, the state could always bank on these guilds to provide it with reserve army whenever the need arose.

One could go on discussing the various dimensions of *tasawwuf* and its impact on the Muslim society but one is forced to end this section on a melancholic note. Every high point has several low points. Once again *tasawwuf* is no exception to the rule. Among the greatest of the great one comes across the lowest of the low. Some of the most hateful and shameful ruffians, cheats and sick spiritualists have also hailed from Sufi backgrounds. They have deceived the Muslim community, destroyed their trust and confidence and defiled their hearts and mind with evil thoughts and prompted them to act in a most unbecoming way. These pseudo-Sufis who abound in numbers today have brought a bad name to the pristine purity of *tasawwuf*. For many spirituality consists in witchcraft, sophistry and a vile play of words, others have taken *tasawwuf* to hoard huge amounts of wealth from the ignorant, still others take *tasawwuf* to perform mysterious healing acts through communication with spirits and demons while for a large number of ignorant Muslims, *tasawwuf* is nothing more than ecstatic music, dance, visiting of shrines and distribution of sweets on the birth or death dates of various saints and believing in all kinds of fantastic and ridiculous anecdotes of these saints. Last but not the least and a very painful phenomenon indeed is that *tasawwuf* has become a hereditary legacy.

Imam Qushayri living in the fifth century hijri lamented the situation of Sufis in the following verse:

As for the tents, they look like their tents;

I see the women of the locality unlike those women.

He goes on to say: “Know – may Allah show mercy upon you – that the verifiers of this way have mostly become extinct and in our times only their faint shadow remains.”

How much worse would our situation be today is not too hard to guess. As long as we Muslims don't go around setting the order right in our own houses, there is no way Allah would bring about any change for us.

In the remaining few pages, we would like to take a look at one of the several Sufi orders or *tariqahs* which spread far and wide and played a great role in uplifting the spiritual life of people and linking them with their God. That is the Rifa'iyyah Order.

***Al-Tariqah al-Rifa'iyyah* or the (Rifa'iyyah Order)**

Its founder was Ahmad bin 'Ali al-Rifa'i who was born in 512 AH/1118 AD in Iraq in the district of Basra in the village of Qaryat Hasan. Since this area was also called Bata'ih, Shaykh Rifa'i has sometimes been referred to as *Shaykh al-Ta'ifah al-Bata'ihyyah*. His ancestors were originally from Makkah and hailed from the family of Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). They had migrated to Andalus in the beginning of the 4th century Hijri and Shaykh Rifa'i's grandfather or his father according to some reports then settled down in Basra around the middle of the 5th century Hijri.

Shaykh Rifa'i's father died when he was just seven so he was taken care of by his maternal uncle Mansur al-Bata'ih who sent him for his traditional studies to a Shafi'i *faqih* Abu'l Fadl 'Ali al-Wasiti. Shaykh Rifa'i studied under him until the age of 27 and then returned to his village. On nearing his death in 540 AH, his uncle bequeathed him the *mashyakhah*.

Shaykh Rifa'i is not known to have travelled a great deal and according to most sources, spent almost his entire life in the villages around Umm 'Abida, his maternal hometown. He passed away in the year 578 AH and was buried in his hometown.

We did not have too many works of the Shaykh until recently. Fortunately, there seems to have been an upsurge of interest in the writings of the Shaykh and scholars have started editing some of the Shaykh's writings or collections of writings. I shall briefly sum up some of the important books which are available in published form today. Except for two or three works, most of the Shaykh's writings are collections of his sermons, aphorisms and sayings.

The first is *al-Burhan al-Mu'ayyad* which was edited by Dr. Safwat al-Saqa in which the Shaykh's sermons have been collected. The second *Kitab al-Wasaya* was edited twice first by Salah 'Azzam and then Dr. Muhammad Zaynhum Muhammad 'Azb. The latter's work is more of a perfunctory job leaving much to be desired. It consists of five sermons in the form of advice to Amir al-Mu'minin Abu'l Muzaffar Yusuf bin al-Muqtafa in which he is asked to uphold the injunctions of the Shari'ah and be kind and considerate towards his subjects. The third work which was recently published was *al-Nizam al-Khass li ahl al-Ikhtisas* edited by Dr. Muhammad Husni and published in 2002. In this book which can be comfortably attributed to the Shaykh, he delineates the contours of his way and gives detailed instructions on the manner of *dhikr*, the *awrad* and the manner in which the *murid* is supposed to progress; in short it is a manual for the Rifa'i order and shows the *murid* they way to Allah through the Shaykh's eyes. The best biographical introduction to the Shaykh, has most probably been written by Dr. Kamal Mustafa Wasfi, himself a practicing Rifa'i, entitled *al-Imam al-Akbar Ahmad al-Rifa'i wa Tariqatuh* in which the learned author has studied the life of the Shaykh, his times, his teachings and most importantly has judiciously and with great acumen analysed and responded to the queries of the adversaries of the Shaykh and his order.

Before we go on to the teachings of the Shaykh, I must make mention here of a very strange yet well authenticated incident which immediately comes to mind once one hears the name of Shaykh al-Rifa'i. In the year 555 AH, after performing Hajj, Shaykh al-Rifa'i went to Madinah to visit the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his mosque. On reaching the grave of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), he said salams to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) upon which the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) replied and the people heard his reply. Shaykh al-Rifa'i turned pale and started shaking in awe and recited two verses in which he requested the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) to extend his hand so that he may kiss it. Immediately the hand of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came out of the grave and Shaykh al-Rifa'i kissed it with due reverence. This has been mentioned by several scholars of note whose veracity stands beyond doubt. A man no less than Imam Suyuti has written a book entitled *al-Sharaf al-Muhattam* on this incident approving of its historicity and authenticity and naming several witnesses of the incident. Ibn al-Faruthi in his *al-Nafahat al-Miskiyyah* also claims to have met five people who claimed to have been witness to the incident.

Another idea which is consistently mentioned in works related to the Rifa'iyyah order is their incredible feats with fire and snakes and the taming of wild animals like lions. I will make mention of two sound sources; Ibn Khallikan (d. 681 AH) in his *Wafayat* and Ibn Battuta (d. 779 AH) in his *Rihlah*.

After briefly mentioning Shaykh Rifa'i's early life, Ibn Khallikan says:

The dervish order (*at-ta'ifa min al-fuqara'*) deriving from him is known as Rifa'iyyah or Bata'ihyyah. His followers experience extraordinary states during which they eat living snakes and enter ovens blazing with fires which are thereupon extinguished. It is said that in their own country [the marshlands] they ride on lions and perform similar feats. They hold festival gatherings (*mawasim*) at which uncountable numbers of fuqara' congregate and are all entertained. Ar-Rifa'i died without issue but spiritual and temporal succession was maintained in that region through his brother's children until this day. (Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-'Ayan wa Anba' Abna' az-Zaman*, vol.1, p.95-96).

Ibn Battuta had this to say about the Rifa'is when he visited Wasit in around 755 AH:

This gave me the opportunity of visiting the grave of the saint Abu'l-'Abbas Ahmad ar-Rifa'i, which is at a village called Umm 'Ubaida, one day's journey from Wasit...It is a vast convent in which there are thousands of poor brethren...When afternoon prayers have been said drums and kettle-drums were beaten and the poor brethren began to dance. After this they prayed the sunset prayer and brought in the repast, consisting of rice-bread, fish, milk and dates. When all had eaten and prayed the first night prayer, they began to recite their *dhikr*, with the shaikh Ahmad sitting on the prayer-carpet of his ancestor above-mentioned, then they began the musical recital. They had prepared loads of fire-wood which they kindled into a flame, and went into the midst of it dancing; some of them rolled in the fire, and others ate it in their mouths, until finally they extinguished it entirely. This is their regular custom and it is the peculiar characteristic of

this corporation of Ahmadi brethren. Some of them will take a snake and bite its head with their teeth until they bite it clean through. (*The Travels of Ibn Battuta*, trans. H.A.R. Gibb).

We shall try to understand and analyze these incidents in a few moments but for now it seems best to highlight some of the Shaykh's teachings and see how will-knit are they with the form of *tasawwuf* which was presented in the first part of this paper. In presenting the Shaykh's teachings, I feel there is no better way than allowing the Shaykh to present his views himself. I have merely translated some of the Shaykh's sayings in the lines to follow and leave their analysis to the reader except where deemed necessary.

The importance of imitating the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and his Sunnah

All sound behaviour is confined to following the *sunnah* of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in his sayings, actions, states and conduct. The conduct of a Sufi reflects his state. And [when you want to evaluate] his conduct, behaviour and sayings, evaluate it through the standard of the Shari'ah. Thence you would know its value.

The emphasis on following the Shari'ah

O respectful brethren! Follow the Shari'ah in its outer and inner forms. There are among you jurists and scholars and you have your study circles in which you lecture and expound injunctions of Shari'ah. There is no way in which I have laboured except that I did so with sincerity and true endeavour and I have not found any way clearer, easier and more lovable than following the sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) and assuming the character traits of the poor, the humble and the lowly.

The Shaykh's favourite pastime—service to the creatures of God

My business is helping women, the widowed and orphans and I like to see myself in their service. When I see an orphan crying, my joints start trembling in sorrow and grief for the child and I fear his crying.

Once while the Shaykh was carrying a load for some ladies, somebody asked him to teach in the mosque while others could carry the burden for the ladies. It is reported that the Shaykh was once asked to teach in the mosque while

For those seeking closeness of Allah

None who has disparaged people and prided in himself has acquired the proximity of Allah.

Characteristics to be inculcated

O respectful brethren! Help me to conquer your souls through five characteristics:

1. Imitating the sunnah of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him).
2. Following the way of the *salaf* in their states.
3. Wearing the garment of indifference towards this world and the self.
4. Facing difficulties with
5. Wear the garment of propriety and eschew hard heartedness. Also wear patched clothes as they represent humbleness and lowliness.

Sources mention that the Shaykh usually made a living by cutting wood for fire and selling it. The Shaykh often used to say “No idle person should try to associate himself to us” emphasizing the importance of hard work and dependence on oneself. Thus he also does away with the common accusation against Sufis that they are lazy and idle and subsist on donations and charity.

Before ending, I would like to say a few words about some of the issues which come as accusations against the Rifa‘is, the most important of which is the feats they perform by walking on fire or biting away at living snakes.

It needs to be kept in mind that all social, political and spiritual movements reflect to a degree the temperament and disposition of their founders. Perhaps, no conclusive ‘scientific’ argument could be marshalled to prove this point but a fair study would definitely display this hypothesis to be pretty sound. If this is true, and I assume it is, then it would go without saying that those who pay allegiance to the Shaykh by being initiated in his order would to some degree reflect his ‘effect’ upon them. Shaykh Rifa‘i has unanimously been hailed as a most considerate, kind-hearted and generous Sufi saint. His emphasis upon humanitarian values, his kindness towards animals and his feeling for *jamadat* (inanimate objects—Sufis consider the whole universe as living and nothing for them is dead. Many Qur’anic verses may be cited to support this view) thus encompassing the whole world is too well known. It should come as no surprise then, if Rifa‘is, as a result of this kind-heartedness of their Shaykh to animals have been able to invoke this power in their treatment of animals and displaying a strange control over them. The fact that Rifa‘is are known to perform incredible feats can only be explained as a result of the intercession and assistance of their Shaykh. However, none of these feats were ever attributed to Shaykh Rifa‘i himself. What Rifa‘i *shuyukh* ought to clearly spell out for their followers is that these feats should not be taken as performing arts. These are spiritual powers which could be invoked when need arises because there is always the danger of Satan tempting the *murid* into performing these feats for selfish gains.

Moreover, modern man has become so materialized that seldom does he think of the immense powers and possibilities which Allah has implanted in the soul. One need only turn to the discourse on ‘*al-Ruh*’ in books of *tasawwuf*, *kalam* and philosophy to realize the diverse ways in which the soul is able to manifest its powers both in the spiritual as well as the physical realm.

When discussing the outreach of the Rifa‘iyyah order, suffice it to say that Spencer Trimingham in his *The Sufi Orders in Islam* has enumerated 17 subsidiary orders (*ta’ifah*) that have branched from the main Rifa‘i order. Its outreach was so widespread (it had originally spread in Syria and Egypt where it struck firm roots)

that Ibn Battuta met people of this order in remote islands of Maldives. In addition to many Arab states, the Rifa'i order also spread to South India, Sri Lanka and a great part of North Africa. Trimingham goes so far as to write that “until the fifteenth century the Rifa'iyyah was the most widespread of all *tariqas*, but from that century it began to lose its popularity in favour of the Qadiriyya. (Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*).

In spite of this assertion from Trimingham—which perhaps would only seem correct as far as the numerical strength of the *tariqas* is concerned—the Rifa'iyyah order continues to play a pivotal role in harmoniously coalescing the Muslim communities of Egypt and India in particular—among other countries—with the best traditions of the sufi path. The manner in which the Rifa'iyyah order has contributed in spreading Islam in these two communities and entrenching it in the already thriving Muslim society is a subject that needs to be highlighted. The lack of academic studies in this regard, although deplorable, is not to be taken as an indicator of the weakness of the Rifa'iyyah tradition.

Lastly it is hoped as S.H. Nasr says “knowledge of the reality and historical development of this spiritual tradition will induce those with the yearning to reach the truth to walk upon such a path [whether it be the Rifa'iyyah or any other authentic tradition]. The sufi orders and their teachings are a light upon the path of Muslims seeking proximity to the One but can also be light for others in quest of the only journey that is ultimately worthy of the human state; a journey that is the very *raison d'être* of human existence.

