

What is Taṣawwuf?

"Verily, he who has purified the heart is successful and he who has despoiled it has lost."

Many people have misunderstandings about *Taṣawwuf*. Many think that it is something beyond the Qurān Shareef and Sunnah. Errant Sufis as well as the superficial Ulamā, although on the opposite ends of the spectrum, are together in holding this mistaken notion. Consequently, the first group has shunned the Qurān and Aḥādīth while the second group has shunned *Taṣawwuf*. Actually, although the term *Taṣawwuf*, like many other religious terms in use today, evolved later, the discipline is very much part of the Shariah. The department of the Shariah relating to external deeds like *Ṣalāh* and *Zakāt* is called Fiqh while the one dealing with the internal feelings and states of the heart is called *Taṣawwuf*. Both are commanded in the Qurān.

Thus, while commanding *Ṣalāh* and *Zakāt*, the Qurān also commands gratefulness and love of Allāh and condemns the evil of pride and vanity. Similarly, in the books of Aḥādīth, along with the chapters on *Ibādah*, trade and commerce, marriage and divorce, are to be found the chapters on *Riyā* (ostentation) *Kibr* (pride) etc. These commands are as much a mandatory requirement as the ones dealing with external deeds.

On reflection, it will be realized that all the external deeds are designed for the reformation of the heart. That is the basis of success in the hereafter while its despoiling is the cause of total destruction. This is precisely what is known technically as *Taṣawwuf*. Its focus is *Tahzīb al-Akhlāq* or the adornment of character; its motive is the attainment of Divine pleasure; its method is total obedience to the commands of the *Shariah*.

Taṣawwuf is the soul of Islām. Its function is to purify the heart from the lowly bestial attributes of lust, calamities of the tongue, anger, malice, jealousy, love of the world, love of fame, niggardliness, greed, ostentation, vanity, deception, etc. At the same time, it aims at the adornment of the heart with the lofty attributes of repentance, perseverance, gratefulness, fear of Allāh, hope, abstention, *Tawheed*, trust, love, sincerity, truth, contemplation, etc.

To diagnose and treat the diseases of the heart normally requires the help of an expert mentor or *Sheikh*. Here are the qualities of a good *Sheikh*.

1. He possesses the necessary religious knowledge.
2. His beliefs, habits, and practices are in accordance with the Shariah.

3. He does not harbor greed for worldly benefits.
4. He has himself spent time learning under the tutorship of a reliable *Sheikh*.
5. The scholars and reputable *Mashāikh* of his time hold good opinion about him.
6. His peers are mostly from among the people who have good understanding of religion.
7. Most of his followers/students follow the Shariah and are not the seekers of this world.
8. He sincerely tries to educate and morally train his students. If he sees anything wrong in them, he corrects it.
9. In his company, one can feel a decrease in the love of this world and an increase in the love for Allāh.
10. He himself regularly performs Dhikr and Shughl (spiritual exercises).

In searching for a *Sheikh*, do not look for his ability to perform *karāmāt* (miracles) or to foretell the future. A very good *Sheikh* may not be able to show any *karāmāt*. On the other hand, a person showing *karāmāt* does not have to be a pious person...or even a Muslim. Ḥadhrat Bayazīd Bustāmī (r.a) says: "Do not be deceived if you see a performer of supernatural feats flying in the air. Measure him on the standard of the Shariah."

When you find the right *Sheikh*, and you are satisfied with his ability to provide spiritual guidance, you perform the Bay'ah or pledge. This is a two-way commitment; the *Sheikh* pledges to guide you in light of Shariah and you pledge to follow him. Then the *Sheikh* will give his Mureed (disciple) initial instructions. For example, they may include the following:

1. Perform repentance for all the past sins and take steps to make amends, e.g. if any *Ṣalāh* has been missed so far in the life, you start making up for it.
2. If you have any outstanding financial obligations toward another person make plans to discharge them.
3. Guard your eyes, ears, and tongue.
4. Perform *Dhikrullah* regularly.
5. Start a daily session of self-accounting before going to bed. Review all the good and bad deeds performed during the day. Repent for the bad ones and thank Allāh for the good ones.

6. Perform *Muraqaba-maut* (meditation over death) every night before going to bed. Just visualize that you have died. Reflect upon the pangs of death, the questioning in the grave, the plain of Resurrection, the Reckoning, the presence in the Court of Allāh, etc. This helps to soften the heart and break the tendency to commit sins.

7. Develop humility. Even if you observe another individual committing the worst of vices, you should not despise him/her, nor should you consider yourself nobler. It is very much possible that the perpetrator of the vice will resort to sincere repentance while the one who despised the sinner become ensnared in the traps of *nafs* and *Shaytān*. One has no certainty regarding one's end. One therefore has no basis for regarding another with contempt. The essential idea of *Tahzīb al-Akhlāq* is to bring our natural faculties in a state of balance. The three basic faculties are anger, desires, and intelligence.

One may write or read until the end of times on this topic, but the only way to understand and benefit from this fundamental branch of the shariah is by entering into Bay'ah with a reliable sheikh, or at least to sit and benefit from his company on a regular basis.

The Ṣahābah were masters of every field of the Shariah, but the main factor that transformed them was that they spent time in the companionship of Allāh's beloved Nabi +. Hence, the Qurān encourages the believers with the following command, "O' the people of Imān, seek the company of the righteous"