PERSONAL GROWTH
IN YOGA AND SUFISM

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Yoga and Sufism have been described as the practical, experiential, spiritual disciplines within the Hindu and Islamic traditions. As such, both systems developed models of psychological growth based on their goals of spiritual realization.

Although these traditions have been commonly studied from a religious viewpoint, it is clear that, insofar as they relate to concrete human experience, they are dealing with psychological issues. Thus, these systems provide, either implicitly or explicitly, models of human nature, of human potential, and of psychological functioning.

We generally think of the positive growth aspects of spiritual traditions-the development of spiritual maturity and enlightenment. There is another side to the process as well, and one that is of growing interest in transpersonal psychology: the clarification of the varying obstacles to spiritual development. Yoga and Sufism offer clear descriptions of crucial obstacles, providing a view of maladaptive human functioning significantly different from Western treatments of psychopathology.

YOGA

Four Stages of Life

The yogic way of life best known in the West is that of ascetic renunciation, including celibacy, poverty and ‘giving up’ the

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world in order to devote oneself completely to the disciplines of yoga. In India there is another ideal path of spiritual growth as well, that of a balanced life of worldly service and responsibilities plus the practice of spiritual discipline.*

There are four stages in this ideal Indian life cycle: student, householder, forest-dweller and renunciant (Smith, 1958). According to traditional Indian conceptions, each stage should last twenty-five years, as the normal life span was said to be one hundred years in the more highly developed past ages.

In many classic Indian works, it is emphasized that an individual must pass through all four stages in order to achieve self-realization. Each stage has its own duties and each provides certain essential lessons and experiences.

During the first stage, the student traditionally serves as an apprentice, living with a teacher and the teacher's family. In addition to the acquisition of occupational skills, the traditional Indian education is devoted to character building through emotional and spiritual discipline. The goal is to become a mature individual, fully equipped to live a harmonious and productive life, rather than remain a slave to one's moods, habits and drives.

At the completion of this stage, the apprentice returns home and, after marrying, enters the stage of the householder. The duties of the householder include carrying on the family business and raising a family. The householder seeks satisfaction in family pleasures, in achieving vocational success, and in serving the community as an active, responsible citizen. The householder is able to live a self-controlled life because of the character training received during the first stage. He or she is not compulsively motivated by desires for sex, fame, or wealth, but is able to enjoy the pleasures and duties of the householder in a moderate way.

The third stage is literally that of the "forest-dweller." It refers to gradual retirement from family and occupational affairs, and dedication to religious practices and spiritual development. When a man and his wife are over fifty years old, their children have become old enough to assume the family responsibilities. The older couple might retire to a small, well-kept home or to a small, secluded place in the forest.

"The Vedas describe various types of ascetics who practiced austerities and other yogic disciplines, who were most likely the forerunners of the wandering yogis of modern India. The ancient rishis, or sages, on the other hand, were more concerned with Vedic sacrifices and hymns and were more a part of the Indian social order, and often married and raised a family. For a fuller discussion, see Feuerstein and Miller, 1972."
secluded cottage in the forest or even remain in the family house after withdrawing from all duties and affairs. They remain available to the rest of the family, consulting with and advising their children when needed.

The individual's last quarter-century is to be devoted to the fourth stage of renunciation. Entrance into this stage is marked by a ritual closely resembling funeral rites. The individual is now officially dead to all social obligations and personal ties, has renounced all worldly desires and ambitions, and is now free to pursue Self-realization without external demands or restrictions.

\textit{Self-Realization}

The details of spiritual growth and development vary with different branches of yoga. For the karma yogi, growth involves the development of self-discipline, will power, and selfless service. For the bhakti yogi, growth is most closely related to an increase in devotion to an aspect of God. For the jnana yogi, growth is a matter of development of discrimination and self-analysis. In various other schools of yoga, growth is viewed in terms of development of the ability to meditate, to withdraw one's attention from the world and the senses and to concentrate more and more deeply on some aspect of Self or Spirit.

All of the diverse branches of yoga share certain fundamental principles. The path of yoga is basically a process of turning the consciousness from the activities of the external world back to the source of consciousness, the Self. The karma yogi seeks to act with Self-awareness without becoming over-involved in the action itself or in the possible results of action. The bhakti yogi endeavors to keep the mind devotionally focused on a person or representation that symbolizes an aspect of Spirit or Self. The jnana yogi seeks the Self by bringing the mind back to the roots of thought and rejecting all that is not Self.

\textit{Ramakrishna, the great devotional yogi, wrote:}

The secret is that the union (yoga) with God can never happen unless the mind is rendered absolutely calm, whatever be the 'path' you follow for God-realization. The mind is always under the control of the Yogi, and not the Yogi under the control of his mind. [Ramakrishna, 1965, p. 186]

\textit{Obstacles to Growth}

Patanjali lists five major afflictions or causes of trouble and suffering: ignorance, egoism, desire, aversion and fear.
Ignorance is the major obstacle to growth. "Ignorance is the cause, the others are the effects.... Ignorance thinks of the perishable as imperishable, of the pure as impure, of the painful as pleasurable, of the non-Self as Self" (Yoga Sutras, II, 4-5). Our consciousness is projected outward from the Self with such great force that it is extremely difficult to direct the mind back to its source. Our concern with the external world and with our continually active senses has replaced Self-awareness. Ignorance is mistaking the effect for the cause, that is, attributing the qualities of the Self to the world, and remaining unaware of the Self as the ultimate cause of all one's experience.

Egoism results from identification of the Self with the body and the thoughts. "Egoism is the identification of the seer with the limitations of the senses" (Yoga Sutras, II, 6). Identification with the body leads to fear, desire and a sense of limitation, and identification with the thoughts leads to restlessness and emotionality.

Desire and aversion are defined by Patanjali simply and elegantly. "Desire is longing for pleasure. Aversion is recoiling from pain" (Yoga Sutras, II, 7-8). These afflictions tie the individual to the constant change and fluctuation of the external world, and they make deep calmness or peace impossible. One major aim of yoga discipline is to overcome our tremendous sensitivity to heat, cold, pain, pleasure and other changes in the outer world. The yogi seeks freedom from the domination of the world and the body, learning to be in control of physical, mental and emotional tendencies rather than being controlled by them.

Satisfying the sensory desires cannot satisfy you, because you are not the senses. They are only your servants, not your Self. 
[Yogananda, 1968,p.60]

Desire and aversion bring about attachment to whatever brings pleasure or avoids pain. Attachment arises from the feeling that we must have something for our own pleasure or fulfillment. Overcoming attachments does not mean, however, that yoga is a negative, joyless self-discipline. The ideal of non-attachment means to enjoy whatever one receives but also to be ready to give it up whenever necessary, without sorrow or a sense of loss.

Ramakrishna often explained non-attachment through the example of a maid-servant who leaves her village to work for a

†Quotes from the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are taken from Purohit (1938).
wealthy family in a big city. She may grow to love the children of the family and call them "my little boy" or "my little girl," and even say, "This is our house." But all the while she knows that they are not her own children, that the house is not her own, and that her real home is far away in a distant village. "I tell those who come to me to lead a life unattached like the maid-servant. I tell them to live unattached to this world-to be in the world, but not of the world..." (Ramakrishna, 1965, p.104).

Fear is the fifth affliction. "Fear is that constant natural terror of death, that is rooted even in the minds of the learned" (Yoga Sutras, II, 9). Fear is the result of identification with the perishable body instead of the imperishable Self. In his commentary on the Yoga Sutras, Purohit writes, "Fear of death is constant in the mind, and as desire and aversion are the result of some experience in the past, so is the fear of death the result of dying in the past" (Purohit, 1938, p. 48).

The afflictions are gradually weakened and attenuated by the practice of basic yoga disciplines, especially austerity and self-control, scriptural study, and devotion. The yogi gradually strengthens subconscious tendencies which are contrary to the afflictions, weakening their influence. The afflictions have two aspects, gross and subtle. In their gross forms the afflictions are actual thought-waves, thoughts of fear, desires, etc. In their finer aspects the afflictions are subconscious tendencies (toward fear, desires, etc.), which remain as potential influences on the yogi until the attainment of the highest state of illumination.

SUFISM

Stages of Personal Development

Many Sufi teachers have described different stages in the course of personal development. Each stage trains or exposes different facets of the aspirant's character and perception. While the process of psychological transformation occurs along separate dimensions concurrently, each stage will be described separately. This does not mean that any single linear pattern is typical or would characterize the actual experience of a Sufi student. Although other writers describe the stages differently (Arberry, 1970; Rice, 1964; Shah, 1964; Trimingham, 1971), they all acknowledge their debts to the model proposed by al-Ghazzali (1058-1111 A.D.).
1. **Initial Awakening (Conversion and Repentance).** This stage begins when a person concludes that the external world is not fulfilling, that it is necessary to re-evaluate one's life. Such a realization is often preceded by a personal crisis which may be coupled with bewilderment about the meaning of existence. It is the beginning of a fundamental reorientation of personal values. What one has strived for may appear to be worthless; what one casts aside as absurd may become filled with meaning. In al-Ghazzali's own case, he gave up his promising and successful career and became a dervish. This was only the beginning of the process of transformation, though it was the most dramatic change in his life.

2. **Patience and Gratitude.** One soon comes to the realization that patience is required for progress, that it takes time to overcome personal limitations. Patience is not merely a passive acceptance of one's faults; it is the willingness to accept the fact that psychological change takes time, and that one's efforts are not immediately rewarded. A person begins to reshape his or her personality gradually, the way a tree is shaped, nourished, and pruned. The growth of patience is accompanied by a sense of gratitude that one is given the time to make progress at all.

   It is better to collect gratitude in the heart than to amass wealth.

   [al-Ghazzali, 1972, p. 158]

3. **Fear and Hope.** In this stage a person becomes more aware of the implications of daily actions. The rightness or wrongness of behavior can no longer be based on the customs of the community. For example, giving food to the needy is commonly considered to be a moral act. However, if the food gives people enough strength to kill themselves or the energy to commit a crime, has the act been truly beneficial? The intent of the action is not an excuse for its unintended effects.

   It is impossible to know the full effects of your own actions. You hope that what you do is beneficial but this hope is linked to the fear that your action may be detrimental. The hope of success is balanced by the fear of failure; the hope for security is coupled to the fear of stagnation. The task becomes the "avoidance of whatever has the least semblance or suspicion of wrong" (Hafti in Rice, 1964, pp. 40-41).

4. **Self-Denial and Poverty.** It should be evident that it is almost impossible to be secure in the stage of hopes and fears. It is always possible to construe some unfortunate results to one's actions. One possible solution lies in detaching yourself from the world, doing as little as possible that might cause harm.
While poverty may be practiced in a literal sense, having no or few possessions, what is important is to be free of attachment. "When the heart is cleared (of all except God) poverty is not better than wealth nor is wealth better than poverty" (Hujwiri, 1959, p. 24). What is important is the loss of desire, not the loss of property.

... higher than the state of ascetism is the state wherein on the approach and departure of wealth the person remains unaffected equally. If it comes he is not glad and if it leaves him he is not sorry.

[al-Ghazzali, 1972, p. 206]

Our normal understanding of these matters is satirized in a traditional story about a rich man who asks a poor man what is the cause of his suffering. The poor man replied, "Half my wages go for food." "I see the cause of your trouble," said the rich one. "You spend your money foolishly. Less than one tenth of my money goes for food."

5. Trust in God (Belief in the Oneness of God). In this stage a person seeks neither support nor consolation from the external world. If one is sincere in one's personal quest, the earnestness of the effort begins to supplement the other forces that are helping the aspirant towards the goal. This is a period of activity, not a time of indolence, passivity or dependency. The balance between acting for oneself and trusting in the divine is captured in the saying of Muhammad: "Trust in God but tie your camel first." Trust arises from assuming that your efforts are part of a larger system, the details of which you are unaware.

Some fools consider trust in God consists in sitting idle, hand on hand, doing nothing.

[al-Ghazzali, 1972, p. 254]

6. Love, Yearning, Intimacy and Satisfaction. In this stage, the developing personality has only one desire, to love God; to love anything other than God is "veiled heresy." It becomes clear that this single desire is the only desire, the only desire that ever truly existed. The earlier stages of giving up attachments, overcoming greed, and the awareness of personal sin fade away under the all-encompassing power of this later realization.

If you cannot discover and understand the secret of which I speak, it is not because it does not exist but because you do not seek rightly. If you make a distinction between the things which come
from God you are not a man on the path of the spirit. If you consider yourself honoured by the diamond and humiliated by the stone, God is not with you.

[Attar, 1961, p. 99]

7. Intent, Sincerity and Truthfulness. This stage is dominated by a concern for the intent, not the forms of action. If one's intentions are correct, then the actual practice is of little importance. There is less interest in observable behaviors and an ever-increasing awareness of the inner meaning of an action.

al-Ghazzali tells the following story about the power of sincerity and the slacking of that personal power when sincerity is diminished.

Amongst the Israelites was a pious man, reputed for his austerities. He heard that some people worship a tree. He took an axe and went to cut it. The Devil met him on the way and said, "Why worry with the worship others carry on? Let them do what they like. Who are you to interfere with it?" He replied, "This act of mine is also worship." The Devil said, "I shall not let you cut it." They both fought and the Devil lost. He prayed to the man to leave him telling him that he shall reveal a secret to him. The Devil then on release told the pious man that the Lord had created no obligation on him to cut the tree, besides, if another person sins in his worship, its consequences will fall on him. Besides, there are many Prophets of the Lord in the world and he could direct anyone of them to go to the owners of the tree and order them to cut the tree. It did not behoove him to perform an act which was not a duty cast on him.

But the man insisted on cutting it. The Devil resisted and in the duel he again lost against the pious man. Again he persuaded the man to release him telling him he shall reveal a more valuable secret to him. Then the Devil began, on obtaining release, "I have heard that you are very poor, living on the charity of others. Such is your good nature that if you ever wish that if you had money you would distribute it among the needy and the poor, but you do not want to beg for that purpose. I have therefore decided to leave every morning under your pillow some coins with which you shall easily feed your family and also play the samaritan. The charities will prove more beneficial to you than cutting down the tree. Even if you cut down the tree they can plant another at the spot. Your effort will then be useless and your family shall not gain anything thereby." Hearing this, the man of piety thought that the Devil was right, inasmuch as he was no prophet with commission from God to cut the tree, nor is it obligatory duty on him to do so nor is there any reason for God to be angry with him, if he did not cut it down. So he returned back home. In the morning when he got up from sleep he found coins under his pillow. He spent them on himself and on charity. That continued for some days. Then the Devil stopped his gift, so in resentment the man got up and went his way.
to cut the tree. On the way the Devil, in the attire of an old man, met him, and on learning that he was going to cut the tree told him that he had not the strength to do that now, and he was a liar if he boasted that he can cut down the tree. This irritated the man of piety and both began to fight. This time the Devil (in the form of the old man) defeated him and wanted to cut his throat when the man begged for life. The Devil excused him on the condition that he promised in the future never to cut the tree. He then asked the Devil, "How could he overcome him this time after losing twice." The Devil replied that formerly he was fighting for God, and his intent was to reap a benefit in eternity, but now he was a slave of his carnal self and for the sake of the world (money) he wanted to cut the tree. So he lost.

[al-Ghazzali, 1972, pp. 321-22]

8. Contemplation and Self-examination. al-Ghazzali describes and considers the distractions that might prevent one from being calm and unable to perceive inner reality. His concerns are similar to those voiced in Yoga and Buddhism with regard to clearing the mind. He describes various ways of meditation and quotes incidents from the lives of teachers who were well versed in meditation. In one story he tells of the saint Shibli who went to Abul Hasan Nuri. Nuri "was seated quiet in the comer of his room, steadfast in concentration and was not moving any limb. He asked him where from had he learnt that secret practice? He replied, 'Prom a cat which was waiting to pounce on a rat' " (1972, p. 335).

9. The Recollection of Death. Contemplating death can be a powerful tool to release one from undesirable habits and attitudes. Thinking about one's death is an exercise in becoming more aware of one's present experiences. It is one way of beginning the process of personal growth. In some sense, what al-Ghazzali described is a cycle beginning with conversion and repentance and ending with the reflection on death leading to the psychological state that precedes conversion. Until recently, Western psychology has avoided considering death. We are a death-fearing culture. al-Ghazzali suggests the following exercise to engrave the awareness of death into our consciousness.

Remember your contemporaries who have passed away, and were of your age.
Remember the honours and fame they earned, the high posts they held and the beautiful bodies they possessed, and today all of them are turned to dust.
How they have left orphans and widows behind them and how their wealth is being wasted after them and their houses turned into ruins.
No sign of them is left today, and they lie in the dark holes underneath the earth.

Picture their faces before your mind's eye and ponder.

Do not fix hopes on your wealth and do not laugh away life. Remember how they walked and now all their joints lie separated and the tongue with which they talked lightly is eaten away by the worms and their teeth are corroded. They were foolishly providing for twenty years when even a day of their lives was not left. They never expected that death shall come to them thus at an unexpected hour....

When something in the world pleases you and attachment for it is born in you, remember death.

[al-Ghazzali, 1972, pp. 378-79]

OBSTACLES TO GROWTH

Heedlessness (Forgetfulness)

The ability to pay attention, to remember what we know, is the cardinal problem of humanity. It is the foundation that supports all other human weakness and psychopathology. It is inherent in our constitution that we lose sight of our divine origin; it is habitual that even as we remember we begin to forget. The thrust of Sufi teaching is to encourage people to pay attention long enough to develop their capacities to remain awake.

Man, like a sleepwalker who suddenly "comes to" on some lonely road, has in general no correct idea as to his origins or his destiny.

[Shah, 1972, p.133]

Although many systems of morality describe the right way to live, they often fail to show how their principles can be put into practice. A first step in overcoming heedlessness is to learn to recognize it in your own life. It is as mundane as misplacing your glasses or as extreme as the story told about Norbert Weiner, the famous cybernetic researcher, who, one day, was walking along a path between two buildings at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology when he met a colleague; they talked for a few minutes and as they parted, Weiner asked his friend to tell him which direction he had been walking when they met. He did not recall if he had been on his way to lunch or had just finished it.

Man is asleep, must he die before he wakes?

[Saying of Muhammad]
Some of those who have been influenced by Sufi teachings indicate that the initial task is to wake up enough to be aware of our predicament. Orage (1965) writes:

Our present waking state is not really being awake at all.... It is, the tradition says, a special form of sleep comparable to a hypnotic trance .... From the moment of birth and before, we are under the suggestion that we are not fully awake; and it is universally suggested to our consciousness that we must dream the dream of this world-as our parents and friends dream it. ... Just as in nightdreams the first symptom of waking is to suspect that one is dreaming, the first symptom of waking from the waking state-the second awakening of religion-is the suspicion that our present waking state is dreaming likewise. To be aware that we are asleep is to be on the point of waking; and to be aware that we are only partially awake is the first conditioning of becoming and making ourselves more fully awake. [p, 89]

As Harman (1967) concludes, "We are all hypnotized from infancy.... The apparent corollary is that we do not perceive ourselves and the world about us as they are but as we have been persuaded to perceive them" (p. 323).

**Incapacity**

Sufi teachers point out that not everyone is at any given moment capable of assimilating their teaching. If the student lacks the capacity to use the teachings, it is like pouring water into sand. A popular saying goes, "When the student is ready, the teacher appears," This does not mean when the student thinks that he or she is ready; it means that when the teacher decides the student is ready for learning, the teacher will attract the student. The student's opinion has little to do with the actual level of readiness and nothing to do with the teacher's decision to accept or refuse the student.

**Nafs**

The nafs are impulses, drives to satisfy desires. They dominate reason or judgment and are defined as the lower forces in one's nature which must be brought under control. They prevent us from activating our totality,

One difficulty we have in understanding nafs is that we usually evaluate an impulse in terms of its social effects, whether it is useful or useless, beneficial or detrimental. The theory underlying the nafs is that all impulses, no matter what their external
effects, can and should be subdued. The goal is to balance the personality and its desires between impulsive excesses and aesthetic detachment. All nafs are products of the self-centered consciousness, the ego, the "I," and can eventually be transcended. The following descriptions are derived from a number of sources (Arasteh, 1973; al-Ghazzali, 1964; Trimingham, 1971; Shafii, 1974).

The Commanding Naf\(s\). Descriptions of these are similar to descriptions of the Id in psychoanalytic theory, closely linked to lust and aggression. al-Ghazzali calls them the swine and the dogs of the soul, the sensual naf\(s\) behaving like swine, the ferocious like dogs or wolves. Wrath, greed, sensual appetites, passion and envy are examples of these naf\(s\). A person dominated by these impulses is unlikely to grow beyond them. These impulses are not to be denied; they are to be properly balanced.

The Accusatory Naf\(s\). These naf\(s\) parallel aspects of the psychoanalytic super-ego. They are evident in excessive self-accusation, belittling of oneself or defensiveness which appears in the form of excessive vanity. Typical manifestations include an insatiable need for praise, hunger for recognition, or a need to control others. "In this stage it is possible for one's motives to become so distorted that it is difficult to distinguish between fantasy and reality" (Beg, 1973). You become increasingly dependent on others' evaluation of yourself, and unable to accept criticism if you are dominated by these naf\(s\).

The Inspired Naf\(s\). These naf\(s\) and those still higher in development do not arise from the animal level but from higher levels of personal consciousness. The problem is not their detrimental effects on others, but their limiting effects on the self. Behaviors common to the inspired naf\(s\) include gentleness, compassion, creative acts and moral action. Overall, a person impelled by the inspired naf\(s\) seems to be an emotionally mature, respectable and respected person. For many, this is a high state to achieve. The Sufis teach that, potentially, there is far more available to the inspiring soul.

The Tranquil Naf\(s\). These naf\(s\) predispose one to be liberal, grateful, trusting and adoring. If you accept difficulties with the same overall sense of security that you accept benefits, you may be said to be dominated by the tranquil naf\(s\). Developmentally these naf\(s\) mark a period of transition. The soul is still encapsulated in its identification with its own concerns. It can now begin to "disintegrate" and let go of all previous concern...
with self-boundaries, and begin to "reintegrate" as an aspect of the universal Self (Arasteh, 1973). In this stage, actions are not performed for conventionally pious reasons but because one is becoming aware of the divine will; one's actions are in accord with the inner natural law. "The Sufi reaches a stage where one transcends the duality of good and bad and perceives all of the manifest dualities as part of a unitary continuum of existence. Categorizing observations or experiences into good-bad, beautiful-ugly, rich-poor, pleasure-pain disappears," (Shafii, 1974).

... the radical division into good and bad can be the sickness of the Mind.

[Erickson, 1964]

The Fulfilled, the Fulfilling, and the Perfected Nafs. These final levels are not easily distinguished or described. They are the obstacles that plague spiritual leaders. These can include the sight of their own good deeds (which can re-arouse vanity), and the sight of their effectiveness with their students (which can re-arouse feelings of power or pride).

The nafs are parallel to the stages of development described earlier. Each stage of growth has within it nafs or impulses which are contrary to the values of that stage. The conflict leads to growth when the nafs are subdued, or to regression if the nafs predominate,

A better understanding of the alternative models of personal growth described in Yogic and Sufic literature can help us more clearly comprehend the interactions between our own model or belief system and our aspirations. One criticism of Western models, especially the Freudian and the behavioristic models, is that they suppose a constrained and limited set of possibilities that can effectively prevent the emergence of the transpersonal levels of the self. A fuller understanding of the universality of the transpersonal levels of personality can be clarified by expanding our vocabulary to include useful aspects of the older psychologies described here.

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