

## 6

# SUFI VARIETIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE: TRANSFORMATION OF THE EGO-SELF

WHY IS TRANSFORMATIVE practice so important? Think back to when you were 15. Would you have preferred at that time to be five years old? Think back to when you were in your mid-twenties. Would you have preferred to be 15? The sum total of physical, emotional, mental and spiritual development as we grow up is called human consciousness development. If we look at our own lives, we can see that, as our own development unfolded, entirely new and wonderful dimensions in life became available for us to explore. There may also have been painful transitions. The technology of transformative practice is about conscious evolution beyond the mental-cognitive realms. If and when the critical mass of transformation occurs, life will never be the same again.

The early part of this chapter emphasises the critical importance of being aware of our own consciousness development, a taboo subject in modern

educational institutions. Academics are used to treating the subjects they teach as conceptual objects, having no relationship to who we are as human beings, living real lives in the world. This is how we learned our subjects and were taught to teach. Nor has it changed since I started my graduate work in 1985. It is an academic taboo to discuss sufism – or any other subject – as if it were transformatively *real*. But exploring sufism is all about ‘self-help’. Ask any sufi, sufi practitioner or visitor needing to go to a sufi shrine. Seriously, what *else* could sufi practice possibly be about? Look back at the Rumi quotes of the previous chapter. He is continually addressing *you* – something that happens occasionally in this chapter, because there are subjects where it is appropriate to get *real*.

The other significant aspect of transformative contemplative practice is that it is one of the most effective ways we know how to consciously evolve beyond what becomes our developmental (cognitive) threshold – usually reached in our late twenties. Hardly anyone cares to go beyond this threshold. It is not because of the lack of information. We have thousands of years of human experience recorded by those who have transformed themselves, aka ‘mystics’, that communicate marvellous insights verifying their transformative methodologies. For the first time in human history, these books have been translated into languages we can read and are publicly available. But we usually disregard this accumulated wisdom, just as we ignore the knowledge that in a very short period of time we will no longer be walking on this earth. It astounded the Buddha-to-be that people lived their lives pretending that they were never going to die. After becoming enlightened, he found a methodology and was able to say, ‘Even death is not to be feared by one who has lived wisely.’<sup>1</sup> In a subsequent statement, revealing the methodology of how to live wisely, Muhammad confided with the well-known sufi hadith, ‘Die before you die.’<sup>2</sup> This meant that the domination of the ego should die – not by killing the ego but by transforming it.

It is easy to see why transformative practice has not become a mainstream item, when the wisdom of the Buddha – and of thousands of others since his time – has been so completely ignored in the past 2,500 years. What the vast majority of people think is happiness is only a temporary, lower level of pain, relieving us of the greater ongoing pain of our lives. Without consciously evolving, we miss whole areas of knowledge and being. All of

us have magnificent homes (our inner being), but how many of us spend our lives idling under the streetlight looking for the key to our house? Transformative practice can have long-term implications for a person's life and forms the very root of the tree of sufism.

### *The methodology of contemplative practices*

For most contemplative paths the preliminary exercise is to still the mind. The senses and the rational mind are to be transcended if one wants to rend the veil and perceive the inner realms. If you have a minute (literally), find a watch with a second hand and look at the second hand rotating, without any thoughts. Keep track of how long it takes for a thought to arise. The vast majority of people cannot focus, even for a minute, without thoughts arising. Where do these thoughts come from? It is clear that one of the most powerful tools we have, the mind, is totally out of control. It took us many years to learn to control our bodies and emotions, at least most of the time, but most of us have never learned to control our minds. If the sufi path of transformation is a journey, then the wayfarer on this journey cannot even begin to travel until the mind is rendered free from thought. Ramana Maharshi (d. 1950, Tiruvannamalai, Tamil Nadu, India) succinctly summarized the situation: 'The mind is only a bundle of thoughts. The thoughts arise because there is the thinker. The thinker is the ego.'<sup>3</sup> Mind is the contents of consciousness and it identifies itself with these contents. This is part of the ego-self, the prison of identifying with the stuff of the mind. Sufi practice, developed over the centuries, has been designed to transform the ego – and remind us that we are not the mind/ego-self.

A typical concentration exercise introducing sufi practice is the remembrance of God (*dhikr*), with the seeker repeating 'Allah', aloud or silently. The advantage of the silent mode is that one can practice it anywhere. By focusing on this word, the mind is stilled – although there is more to it than its simply being a mantra. More advanced recollection exercises (see the Naqshbandi section below), called 'meditation' and 'contemplation', require solitude and a quiet place. In a very generalized sense, there are three stages to transformative practice: concentration, meditation and contemplation. Concentrating the

mind is like sharpening a pencil; meditation is like learning to form letters; and contemplation is like writing words and sentences. The transition from concentration to meditation often begins in the heart. Sufis have repeatedly stressed that the foundation of remembrance of God rests in the heart, just as the profession of faith (there is no god but God and Muhammad is God's messenger) involves the tongue and the heart simultaneously. There are many practices in the sufi repertoire and what they share in common is a methodology that allows human beings to find out who they really are.

*The methodology of listening to chanted verse and music to facilitate altered states*

In sufism and other transformative practices, altered states of consciousness are part of the experiential terrain. At one extreme, this perceived 'attraction to God' in altered states can cause people to barely function in everyday life (as mentioned in the introduction). One of these 'attracted-to-God' persons touched one of the sufis I worked with in Peshawar, Pakistan, and he was then not able to write for about six months, because his arms continued to shake so much.

Naqshbandis are supposedly a 'sober' group – admittedly in many places they are, but my impetus to study the Naqshbandi–Mujaddidis happened after witnessing the most 'drunken', ecstatically out of control group of people I had ever seen. The Mujaddidi shaykh sat in front of about 100 people, transmitting what I later discovered to be a subtle energy that activated their subtle centres (explained below). This phenomenon was also called 'attraction to God'. When the subtle energy exceeded the capacity of their subtle centres, people stood up and started moving around; some in circles, some running back and forth crashing into walls and some rolling on the ground. It was mayhem. The audio portion of the session included crying out and screams. I was one of the very few people who remained quite sober, sitting on the floor. As I later discovered, this happened regularly every Thursday evening and was a way of 'working out' the subtle centres, so that seekers could better develop them in their much more sedate and sober contemplative practices.

When I read the Chishti accounts of what goes on in their listening sessions, it appears very similar to what I witnessed with the transmission of spiritual energy. (However, this is comparing my interpretation of a text with an experience, which may not be a valid comparison.) Chanted verse and music in the Chishti context is supposed to facilitate greater intimacy between the human lover and the Beloved.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps this is the same as increasing one's attraction to God through the use of more poetic language.

Chishti practice of listening to chanted verse and music has had a strict set of rules and an accompanying discipline of ego training. In the case of Nizamuddin Awliya (d. 1325), each listening session began and ended with recitation of the Qur'an; everyone had to be in a state of ritual purity (a requirement before Islamic prayer); and there was no chewing of betel nut allowed. Instead of explaining the altered states of consciousness during listening to chanted verse and music in terms of subtle centres, one of Nizamuddin's pupils, Burhanuddin Gharib (d. 1337, Khuldabad, Maharashtra, India), explained it in terms of longing for God (or not). If the listener is totally longing for God, with very little, if any, longing for the world, then listening to music in sufi assemblies is permitted. If there is more longing for the world than for God, then listening to music is not permitted. Nizamuddin described three kinds of ecstasy:

- 1 Empathetic ecstasy of the uninitiated, seen by a voluntary movement of a listener
- 2 Momentary ecstasy of a sufi seeker, who listens through his current state of awareness
- 3 Durative ecstasy of an advanced sufi, who hears the music via a direct connection to God.<sup>5</sup>

This activity has continued to prove controversial since the ninth century, partly due to occurrences of abuse in letting all and sundry listen to music in a sufi context.

My sense, looking from afar at Mevlevi and Chishti practices of listening to 'chanted verse', where altered states are the goal, is that they do assist somehow in the other meditation–contemplation practices. In the Mevlevi case, it started with Rumi having spontaneous ecstatic experiences.

Subsequent development of Mevlevi practice – like the whirling ritual – came into being as a way to consciously experience these states – and surely to keep them within ritual limits. Chishti sources do not discuss how spontaneous altered states became institutionalized into what we now know as the Chishti ritual of chanted verse and music. Reading the sufi literature on listening to music, one would imagine that it was the ‘be-all and end-all’ of sufism as it opens up ‘the heart’s understanding of realities, becoming aware of God’s meditations and the divine speech and will, [and] opening up of the tongue of conscience to God’.<sup>6</sup> This may well be the case, particularly with gifted individuals. On the other hand, an anonymous eleventh-century shaykh remarked, ‘A time will come when this music will be no more to you than the croaking of a raven. The influence of music only lasts so long as there is no contemplation, and as soon as contemplation is attained music has no power.’<sup>7</sup>

### *Varieties of sufi practice*

The methodologies employed across the world by sufi shaykhs are almost as varied as the number of practising shaykhs, or so it appears. Here are a few brief contemporary examples. The Egyptian Rifa’i shaykh, Zahir Abu Zaghlal begins the remembrance session at 9 p.m. (The Rifa’i lineage is named after Ahmad Rifa’i, d. 1182, Iraq.) After a meal, the men stand in a circle, inclining to the right saying ‘*la ilaha*’ (there is no god), then straightening their bodies in the centre, to then incline to the left and say ‘*illa Allah*’ (but God). The shaykh is part of the circle, but it is the singer leading the session through repetition of names of God or verses of poetry who determines the tone of the session, in subtle harmony with the shaykh. The remembrance gathering goes through half-hour segments, with the tempo increasing throughout, until it peaks at around midnight. Two generations ago, they stopped using musical instruments and, more recently, Abu Zaghlal abolished the Rifa’i practice of passing iron skewers through throats and stomachs, because he thought it was just showing off.<sup>8</sup>

In Herzegovina, Hisham, a Naqshbandi shaykh, conducts a one-hour remembrance session in a small lodge at the source of the Buna River. The

men sit in a circle in one room and women sit in rows in another. After reciting from the Qur'an, sitting sufi aspirants repeat various names of God, followed by '*la ilaha illa Allah*'. Sometimes the repeating of names is done in the heart and other times articulated while breathing quickly at four breaths per second. There is some movement right and left. Further Qur'an recitation and praising of the Prophet finish the session.<sup>9</sup> These Naqshbandi–Khalidi practices bear no resemblance to any I have seen in Afghan, Turkish or Indo-Pakistani Naqshbandi groups.

In Macedonia the Halvetis are the most popular sufi lineage. One sub-lineage (Hayati) no longer practices a rotating movement while standing in a circle nor uses musical instruments. The men sit in a circle, wearing the long caps that Mevlevis wear, and gently move their heads to the right and left and forward and backward repeating '*la ilaha illa Allah*', '*hu*' and '*hayy*'. The shaykh also gives everyone special exercises to do before and after the Islamic morning prayer, as part of their ego training. Most of the seekers in this group are sons of those already in the group. Women can watch the remembrance sessions, but not participate.<sup>10</sup>

Historically, there was also considerable variety in sufi practice. Chishti Nizamuddin Awrangabadi (d. 1730, Awarangabad, Maharashtra, India) wrote a compendium of meditation and contemplation methods in his Persian treatise, *The Order of Hearts*. These included ways to remember God by repeating 'Allah', '*la ilaha illa Allah*', or other names of God, visualizing letters or words, using various methods of breath control and moving a name or formula from the lower to the upper part of the body. One practice was to recite a given formula, while only breathing 2,000 breaths in a 24-hour period. He also incorporated Qadiri and Naqshbandi techniques, e.g. visualizing 'Abdulqadir Jilani and practising some of the 26 Naqshbandi contemplations. Yoga contemplative technology, adapted harmoniously to an Islamic context, expanded the repertoire even further.<sup>11</sup>

### *A Naqshbandi–Mujaddidi system*

The beginning, 'concentration phase', of Naqshbandi practice begins with repeating the word 'Allah' and simultaneously involves an activation of the

heart 'subtle centre', part of a subtle realm associated with the human body. There are what I call 'subtle bodies', which are expressed in the literature as *latifas*, literally, 'subtleties'. Two of these are located in the world of creation – the physical frame and the ego-self; and the other five are located in the world of command – heart, spirit, mystery, arcane and super-arcane. In a training environment, where aspirants need specifics, these subtle bodies are given locations on the body and are called 'subtle centres', with colours associated with them.<sup>12</sup>

Of all the subtle centres, the heart subtle centre is primary; it is the inner catalyst that enables other subtle centres to become active. This is not the physical heart, though its location is described by Naqshbandis as overlapping the part of the physical heart that has a shape of an inverted pine cone. One way Naqshbandi shaykhs activate the heart subtle centre is by putting the four fingers of the right hand on the place of the heart subtle centre (sometimes called the 'mouth' of the heart) and saying 'Allah' three or more times, while delivering a blast of subtle energy to the seeker's heart. This often happens during initiation, depending on the shaykh's practice. For initiating women, either their husband practitioners initiate them or the woman holds a metre-long piece of cloth at the heart and the shaykh holds the other end of the cloth.

Naqshbandi shaykhs have explained that, by imparting the name of God, they are establishing God's imprint (*naqsh*) on the heart. One definition of a 'Naqshband' is 'a person whose heart is impressed with God's name'. Usually the seeker is instructed to spend time each day being aware of the heart, constantly repeating 'Allah', until the heart repeats it all the time. Although this is silent recollection of God, as opposed to vocal recollection, technically speaking, it is recollection of the heart. The advantage of this type of recollection is that it can be performed in any circumstance *and* it begins to activate the human system of subtle centres. A cross-legged body posture, with the hands down on the knees, is the same for all Mujaddidi practices.

The shaykh's subtle centres transmit a subtle energy – an enabling energy – that apparently connects the macrocosm with the human microcosm and facilitates the development of subtle centres. Sometimes Naqshbandis describe the actual flow of energy as spiritual attention. For this process to work properly, there needs to be an attunement between the shaykh and the

seeker. It is this concept of divinely emanating energy that is used to explain how sufi shaykhs positively influence people's behaviour or cure others of undesirable conditions and illnesses. Sometimes this subtle energy – often perceived as divine grace – can be transmitted through the breath, like blowing in a glass of water, through a handshake, or by touching the head or places on the chest. But when 'hearts are near', this process can occur with no physical contact whatsoever.

When all of the subtle centres are reciting 'Allah', the seeker proceeds to 'the recollection of negation and affirmation'. The negation is, 'There is no god' and the affirmation is, 'but God'. Holding the breath below the navel, the seeker brings the word '*la*' from below the navel to the point between the middle of the eyes.<sup>13</sup> Then the word '*ilaha*' is mentally conveyed from the middle of the forehead to the right shoulder, ending with the final forceful mental motion that 'hits' the heart from the right shoulder with '*illa Allah*'. This can be loosely called the meditation stage of Naqshbandi practice. When seekers are proficient in this exercise, they are ready to travel towards God in the contemplations, the progressively more subtle cosmological levels. Contemplation in Naqshbandi terms is waiting in stillness as the subtle centres attract subtle energy, turning away from states and attributes, and being immersed in an ineffable beauty and love. There are 26 separate Mujaddidi contemplations, each with its special intention to guide one closer and closer to God, visiting various prophets on the way.

Exactly where Naqshbandis go in their subtle travelling is not easy to determine. There is the precedent of the Prophet's journey through the seven heavens, but Naqshbandis seldom, if ever, speak in those terms. Wherever this journey takes place, it is certainly not in the normal waking mind, which is why the concentration exercises come first. It is impossible with our current understanding to know what part of the human being actually travels in these other realms, but there is the possibility that Naqshbandi practice is the creation/activation of latent, more subtle bodies. One can then travel in the corresponding subtle realms with these subtle-body vehicles. Picture a ferry carrying a car with people in it. The ferry is the vehicle for water, as the car is the vehicle for land. When one gets out of the car to enter a building, the body is the vehicle, and in dreams yet another vehicle operates. Four realms corresponding to four vehicles.

From this perspective perhaps Naqshbandi practice is simply developing vehicles, learning how to move between them at will to experience different ontological realities. Whether this hypothetical model corresponds to how things actually work or not, access to various realms of the non-physical cosmos is inside each of us. Sufis report that the inner universe, accessed through the heart, is seven times larger than the physical universe. The experiences described earlier – of contact with deceased sufis and Uwaysi initiations – or even seeing and communicating with a shaykh in dreams – could be explained as instances of interactions between subtle bodies.

### *The fourfold cyclical path to God (see fig. 6.1)*

Before beginning the sufi path, an ordinary person living in consensus reality is in a state of abiding in ignorance. The world preoccupies him both on the inside and the outside. This is known as the ‘first abiding’. The Naqshbandi–Mujaddidi cyclical fourfold path begins by wayfaring to God in the world of command, the shadows of God’s names and attributes. The first mode of wayfaring occurs in the outer world, going further and further, followed by inner wayfaring, moving closer and closer. Finishing the latter mode roughly coincides with the completion of wayfaring to God. Many sufis get stuck at this stage of wayfaring to God, because of frequent ecstatic experiences. Sometimes one is given conditional permission to teach at this point. Here the aspirant experiences God on the outside and the world on the inside. The end of ascent in the ‘lesser intimacy of God’ is associated with ‘the unity of contemplative witnessing’.

The next part of the journey involves a descent ‘returning to the world of creation for God and by means of God’. This is the beginning of greater intimacy with God, where one begins to purify the spirit from the ego-self. The journey culminates in the fourth and last cycle: to live as an extraordinarily ordinary person in the created world. Although one experiences the multiplicity of the world, it is experienced as a mirror of the One. Here unity is experienced in the multiplicity, and multiplicity is experienced as a unity. This is the place where one is with God on the inside and with the world on the outside. It is the ‘best of both worlds’, where one can see with

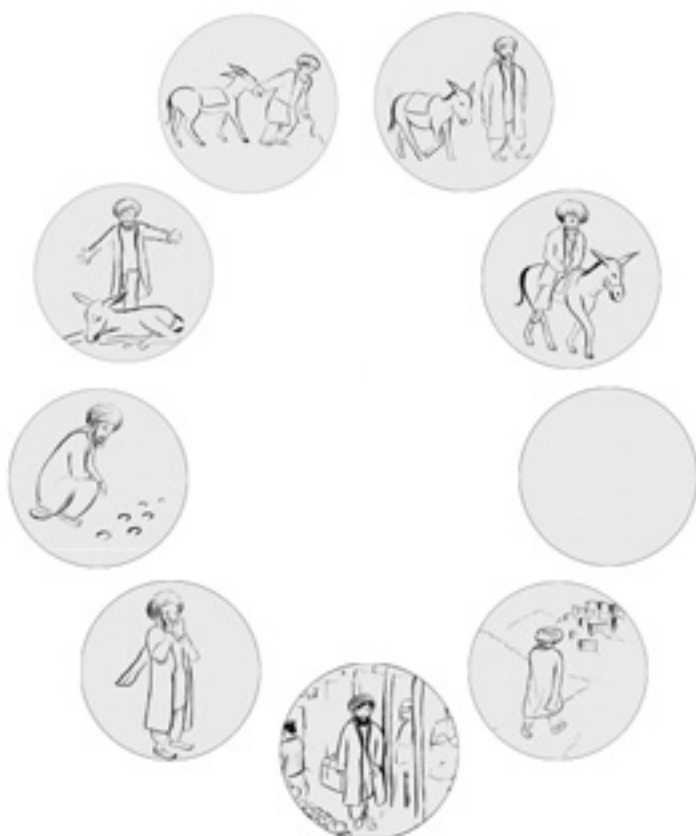


**FIGURE 6.1** The Mujaddidi path, moving clockwise from the bottom picture: 1. Nasruddin in the bazaar [the first abiding]; 2. Nasruddin looking for his donkey [starting to deal with the ego-self]; 3. Nasruddin finding footprints of the donkey [starting to work on the subtle centres]; 4. Nasruddin finding the donkey [more awareness of the ego-self – the beginning of wayfaring to God]; 5. Nasruddin catches his donkey, although the donkey is recalcitrant [grappling full-on with the ego-self]; 6. The donkey is calmly following Nasruddin [the beginning of a tranquil ego-self]; 7. Nasruddin riding the donkey [a tranquil ego-self – the beginning of wayfaring in God]; 8. An empty image [beginning of separation of the spirit and ego-self from the heart – complete ascent and an experience of annihilation of the ego]; 9. Nasruddin walking back to town without the donkey [returning to the world of creation for God and by means of God]; 10. The same image as no. 1 [the second abiding – extraordinarily ordinary], Nasruddin in the bazaar.

two eyes: the right eye of unity and the left eye of multiplicity. A person who returns from an ascent to the most subtle worlds beyond the world of command is only outwardly in the world. Inwardly he is with God. This return to the world as the end of the path was pioneered a millennium previously, with the bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana Buddhism. Travel in these more subtle realms is also to return to the paths experienced by prophets, the experiential sources of the religion of Islam.

*Mevlevi turning towards God: 'The whirling dervishes'*

Rumi once exclaimed, 'Music is the gates of paradise creaking.'  
Someone remarked, 'The sound of creaking gates is unpleasant.'  
Rumi replied: 'You hear the gates closing, but I hear them when they are opening!'

Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273, Konya, Turkey) is principally known for his multi-layered masterpiece of poetry, the *Mathnawi*. If there is a planetary poet, transcending time and cultures and speaking profoundly to human hearts, it is Rumi, who is usually known as Mevlana in Turkic languages, an honorific indicating a person of great knowledge. Here are the first 18 verses of the *Mathnawi*, making the number 18 very special for Mevlevi (translated by the author from the Persian):

Listen to the lament of the reed flute, of being separated, but not mute.  
Since I was cut from the reed bed, my notes have made people lament.  
I can only share this pain with a heart that is split like a broken window-pane.  
Anyone pulled from the primal source yearns to return.  
Grieving in the crowd, amongst the happy and those who yearn.  
They became my friend for their own sake; none sought the secrets within me that they could not take.  
The secrets of sadness are in the song that no one hears, no ears.  
Body is not hidden from soul, nor soul from body; alas no one sees the soul.

The reed flute is played with fire, not breath – without this burning,  
only death.

Love's fire exhales the reed's notes as love so fine dissolves in wine.

The reed is a friend of those forced apart as it lifts the veils of the heart.

It's a poison and cure like the beloved and the longing lover, one inside  
the other.

The reed leaves a bloody trail pouring from the heart as one madly in  
love falls apart.

Propelled beyond the senses on the reed song if one can hear, otherwise  
it is just the ear.

In grief day after day, burning aches and pains never leaving the fray.

Let these days go without concern; remain with the One who makes  
the heart burn.

Only fish are relieved of thirst, but without daily bread the stomach hurts.

The raw are far from being ripe so best to cut this short and say goodnight.

The story of the reed flute expresses the plaintive longing of humanity. Just as humans are lifeless without the merciful breath of God, the flute can only cry when someone breathes into it. The flute, cut off from its homeland in the reed bed, is akin to human beings who are separated from realizing their real home of deep and exalted being. It is this separation, ironically, that allows the reed flute to exclaim its longing to return.

When Rumi was alive, he first held group sessions of listening to music and turning, at Karatay, the school where he taught, then at other schools and gardens, and even at the governor's palace. This ritual of turning – not a dance – developed to train those who did not have spontaneous ecstatic states, in order to cultivate these altered states of consciousness.

It is likely that many contemporary observers of this ritual – mostly tourists in Turkey – do not realize the profundity of worship that used to exist before it became a whirling tourist attraction. They just buy their tickets and sit down to watch. In practising Mevlevi teacher Kabir Helminski's words, the turning ritual of facing towards God is 'honoring and reverencing our relationship with the Divine'. It is also a meditative practice in motion; a much more challenging type of meditation, because the moment a person loses focus and presence, it will immediately affect the

equilibrium of their turning. One is returning closer to the Source inside, but also connecting to a series of relationships. In Helminski's words:

You have to be aware not only of yourself but of your position and distance from the other turners and inwardly aware through the heart of your connection to the shaikh who is leading the ceremony, holding the transmission of the lineage. There's a continuum that connects to a transmission back to the shaykh, back to Mevlana. So the ceremony is elegant; it's disciplined; it's sober; it's ecstatic; it's creative; it's holy; it's all these things.<sup>14</sup>

In traditional Mevlevi sufi lodges, some of which are now open for 'performances', there is a special octagonal assembly hall where this ritual turning takes place. Coming through the entrance, one faces the prayer niche in the opposite wall, indicating the *qibla* (the direction towards Mecca which Muslims face when they pray). In front of this prayer niche, the presiding shaykh sits on a red-dyed sheepskin. The area is divided into two symmetrical halves by an imaginary centre line, starting from the sheepskin and extending to the entrance, and representing the shortest path to God; dervishes must never step on this line.<sup>15</sup> The musicians are seated by the entrance. A typical ensemble often includes musicians playing the reed flute, a small double kettledrum, a zither-like instrument, with 72 strings, and a lute. Mevlevi attire includes a long white robe worn over a short, tight-fitting jacket, open in front and a conical-shaped hat. High-ranking dervishes have a turban wound around the hat (see figs 6.2, 6.3, 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6).

The dervishes enter and sit with their legs folded underneath. When the shaykh sits on his sheepskin, the ritual begins. Verses from the Qur'an are recited, followed by praises to the Prophet Muhammad and to Mevlana. The drum bangs four times, announcing an improvisation on the reed flute that symbolizes the breath of compassion breathing the universes into existence. The eulogy to the Prophet precedes the creation of the universes, because of the holy hadith (where God is speaking in the first person) stating, 'If it hadn't been for Muhammad I would not have created the universes.'

The next part of the ritual, the prelude, is in honour of Rumi's son, Sultan Walad. After the reed flute solo, the dervishes stand up, led by the

shaykh, and begin to walk slowly around the hall counter-clockwise – just as pilgrims circle around the Ka‘ba in Mecca. The shaykh takes his place at the left of his sheepskin. He bows and walks to a point on the right side of his sheepskin. The master of ceremonies (*semazen*), who is behind him, takes his place to the left of the sheepskin. They bow to each other and then each of the dervishes bows to the shaykh. Step by step, slowly and deliberately, they all circle the hall three times counter-clockwise. After this third rotation, the shaykh takes his place on the sheepskin, and the prelude music ends. A flute improvisation concludes the first part of the ritual.

The second and main part of the ritual, the whirling, is divided into four salutations. The dervishes are simultaneously anchored to the ground yet ‘flying inside’ to become closer to God. Each of the four salutations has a different tempo and type of music. With the exception of the master of ceremonies and the shaykh, the dervishes lay aside their outer black robes (symbolizing death), leaving a white undergarment (grave shrouds) and their skirt. The master of ceremonies kisses the shaykh’s hand and the



**FIGURE 6.2** Three Mevlevi conical hats. These were made of two layers of felt. The middle one (a *dal sikke*) was for students and affiliates (*muhibbs*), without the sash. The ones on either side, with wound sashes, were worn by those authorized to teach, a green sash being reserved for a descendant of the Prophet and a purple sash for heads of sufi lodges.



**FIGURE 6.3** Three turbans on tombstones. The turban on the left is a four-banded 'crown-hat', bound at the rim with thick cloth, located in the cemetery adjacent to Sünbül Efendi's (d. 1529) shrine in Istanbul. The middle one is an Adhami (named after Ibrahim ibn Adham, d. c.777) four-banded crown-hat from Kastamonu, and the turban on the right is on the tombstone of Ahmed Efendi, a Naqshbandi-Khalidi shaykh buried in Kastamonu.



**FIGURE 6.4** A Shamsi crown-hat, said to be like that of Shams-i Tabrizi, which can be traced back to Central Asia. The words *la ilaha ila Allah* (there is no god but God) are sewn on the cotton part of the hat.



**FIGURE 6.5** Early twentieth-century photo of Mevlevi dervishes in front of a water fountain alongside the Galata Mevlevi sufi lodge in Istanbul.

shaykh, in turn, kisses his hand. This means the shaykh gives his authorization and blessing for the ritual. Each dervish pauses in front of the shaykh, bows and kisses his right hand, while the shaykh kisses each dervish's hat. When a dervish reaches the shaykh's sheepskin, he turns around and bows to the dervish following him in the ritual, both looking into each other's eyes.

Holding their arms crossed in front of the chest with hands on opposite shoulders, each dervish bends his head towards one shoulder with downcast eyes. Then the dervishes start to whirl, forming a circle, one by one. The whirling is done by pivoting around on the left foot with the right foot crossing over the top of the left instep to keep up the motion. As the speed of the spinning increases, the arms are raised, with the right palm turned upward and the left hand lowered with the palm turned downward. Sometimes one arm is outstretched and the other pressed against the heart. As they quicken their rotation, the long white skirts become fully expanded in open circles. The master of ceremony indicates which dervishes should turn in the outer orbit, while others remain in the inner orbit.



**FIGURE 6.6** Interlaced letters ‘Ya Hazret-i Mevlânâ’ (O holy presence of Mevlana), forming a conical hat. The hyacinth bouquets are the symbol of the Sünbülü branch of the Helveti lineage.

This is repeated three times. Kissing the hand of the shaykh is only done in the first stage of salutation. After that, each period between the salutations is broken by a pause in the music when the dervishes cross their arms on their chests, putting their hands over their shoulders. The salutation is done by bowing slightly while standing with the right toe over the left toe and the right hand on the heart. As the music picks up again, they begin to turn. This pause allows the dervishes to step back from the brink of ecstasy to affirm servanthood and then re-enter the ritual. Through the first three salutations, the music keeps building and building. The third salutation is the most energetic, most ecstatic part of the ritual, where one comes into the closest intimacy with God.

The fourth and final salutation is different, because the master of ceremonies keeps everybody in the outer circle. The shaykh takes part by whirling to the centre – both of the centre line and the hall – the axis point and the space symbolically reserved for Rumi, as he radiates the *baraka* of the lineage. The singing of the music part of the ritual finishes as the dervishes are still moving. The *whoosh* of the dervishes' robes and their leather-slippered feet fall silent, as a single reed flute starts playing and the dervishes stop, standing wherever they are. When the shaykh spins back to his sheepskin, the flute improvisation and the whole ritual abruptly end. A Qur'an reciter then starts, often picking the verses, 'The east and the west are God's and wherever you turn is the face of God' (Q. 2:115). 'God needs only to say "be" and it is.' (Q. 2:117). The dervishes go quickly back to their sheepskins and kneel, putting on their outer garments. After this recitation, the master of ceremonies stands up and makes a supplication for Muhammad, Mevlana and the lineage, before the dervishes follow the shaykh out of the door.

People observing this amazing ritual have become a historical part of the Mevlevi ritual itself. There has typically been a place for guests, either around the hall itself or in a gallery above the ground floor. The sacred space of the ritual in a Mevlevi sufi lodge is intentionally designed to share the *baraka*, again underlying the notion of service to others.

You can see from this brief description that Atatürk's law, in 1925, affected Mevlevi quite adversely. With the clothing, rank and the ritual itself outlawed, along with the Mevlevi lodges being confiscated, one would

not have expected the Mevlevis to have survived to the present day. In fact, clandestine ceremonies continued to be held and, in 1953, the Turkish government allowed the first public turning ceremony to be held, in a Konya cinema, for Rumi's death anniversary on 17 December. This festival has continued annually, although many Mevlevi teachers in Konya do not consider this to be a positive development. In 1967, a senior Mevlevi teacher resigned from the association that organized the annual festival in Konya, arguing that the authenticity of the ceremony was severely compromised, having been debased into a tourist show.<sup>16</sup> Scholars writing about Mevlevi activities in Turkey, which for them are synonymous with the turning ritual, are under the impression that the Mevlevis as a sufi lineage are defunct, only 'going through the motions' in the whirling ritual. When I ask why this is the case, they say it is because the rigorous 1001-day retreat training to become a qualified dervish is no longer possible, since there are no longer any functioning Mevlevi sufi lodges.

### *The 1001-day Mevlevi retreat: Intensive sufi training in the lodge*

By the seventeenth century, the turning ritual had been formalized along the lines we know today, together with the formal 1001-day Mevlevi retreat. Both activities continued to evolve over the centuries. Primary Mevlevi sufi lodges were designed and authorized for the 1001-day sufi training. There were an estimated 140 in the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. Numerous subsidiary Mevlevi lodges existed throughout the empire, but they were not equipped for training of aspirants (see figs 6.7–6.12).

Whoever decided to do the retreat and become a Mevlevi 'elder' had to have parental permission, be at least 18 years old, unmarried and of worthy character. After a vow of repentance, there was a three-day trial period, during which the aspirant could observe the Mevlevi way of life from a designated place in the kitchen. The sheepskin of the water-carrier was then placed on a bench to the left of the entrance to kitchen, the busiest place in the lodge. Here the aspirant ate, prayed and slept in the same spot. No one spoke to him, nor was he allowed to read anything. He was closely

observed. If he decided to stay and if he was found suitable, the chief of the cauldron assigned him an 18-day course of physical and mental tasks around the lodge. He still wore his own clothing for this 18-day trial period. After this second trial period the chief of the cauldron conferred with the head of the kitchen, who then gave him a cap to wear and ‘service clothing’, which he wore with a long-sleeved shirt. Then he began 18 different menial tasks, each supervised by an individual dervish, e.g. washing the dishes and laundry, sweeping floors, making beds, serving food and cleaning the toilets. Mevlevi sufi training was explicitly based on training the ego through discipline and rules of conduct, overseen by the chief of the cauldron. The novice was slowly cooked over the 1001 days.

In Mevlana’s kitchen, the room designated for ‘cooking’ novices, the aspirant learned to whirl by placing two toes of his left foot around a knob on a metre-square wooden board covered with salt. To learn to do the turning ritual well enough to participate in the formal ritual with the other dervishes, it took anywhere from three months to a year. Mevlana’s kitchen was the special room where aspirants learned to beautifully recite the Qur’an, to sing praises to Muhammad and to learn the basic religious sciences. Depending on his skills and inclination, the aspirant



**FIGURE 6.7** Front entrance to the Galata Mevlevi sufi lodge, early twentieth century.



**FIGURE 6.8** The Mevlevi-presiding shaykh, sitting on the sheepskin with the dervishes on his left. The large picture in the background is a depiction of Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi.



**FIGURE 6.9** A seventeenth-century artist's depiction of the Galata Mevlevi sufi lodge, with dervishes 'turning towards God'. The *mihrab* (indicating the direction to the Ka'ba) has been displaced by the artist and hidden behind pillars. Instead, it should be directly in front of the entrance, where the wooden seat, a low *minbar*, is located.

could also learn to play an instrument or sing the vocals used in the Mevlevi ritual turning ceremony. In many lodges there were opportunities to learn miniature painting, wood engraving and calligraphy.

After both the dawn prayer and the evening prayer, the dervishes gathered in the mosque space to repeat aloud 'Allah' together, the well-known Mevlevi meditative practice of the 'majestic remembrance of God'. Every aspirant had to ask permission of his supervising dervish to imprint 'Allah' in his heart. Alone in his cell, the seeker repeated 'Allah' 3,000 times each day. When he reached the point where the tongue of the heart automatically repeated 'Allah', he no longer needed to do vocal remembrance of God alone in his cell.

Once the aspirant successfully finished the 1001-day retreat, there was a celebration with candles, desserts, special sheepskins and a prayer, blessing the chain of shaykhs in the Mevlevi lineage. The head of Mevlana's kitchen assigned the new dervish a cell, where he remained for three days with



**FIGURE 6.10** A contemporary view of the ceremony of turning towards God, seen from above. The Mevlevi dervishes are all whirling in white, with the musicians on top in black and the shaykh to the left.



**FIGURE 6.11** A miniature painting depicting Rumi's ecstatic encounter with Salahuddin Zarkub, a goldsmith and Rumi's future son-in-law, as he was beating the gold. Their astonishment is indicated by the forefingers pointing towards their mouths.

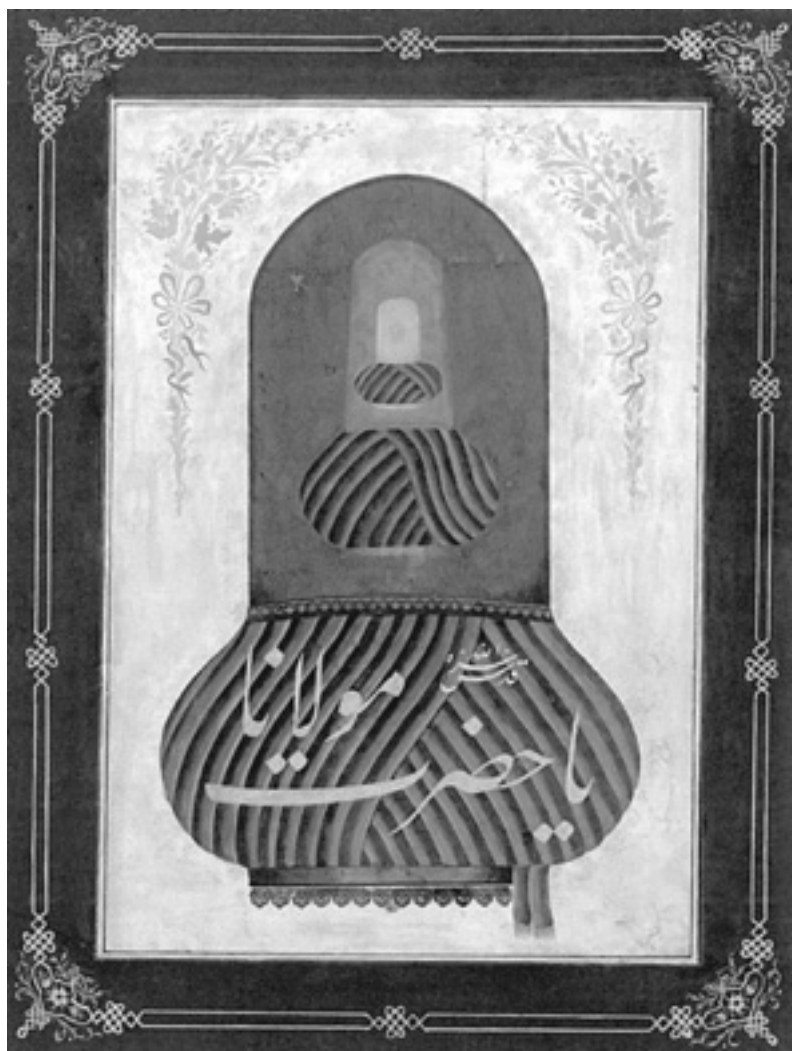


**FIGURE 6.12** ‘Ya Hazret-i Mevlânâ, quddus Allah sirrahu’ (O holy presence of Mevlana, may God bless his inner heart). A nineteenth-century depiction of three Mevlevi conical hats inside each other. The coiling sash is green, signifying the wearer to be a descendant of the Prophet.

the door shut. Each of the elders of the lodge came to his cell with gifts, congratulations, food and coffee. Except for prayer and using the toilet, he was not permitted to leave. After three days, the head of Mevlana's kitchen would come, ask permission to enter and take the dervish to the shaykh for a formal initiation, where he was given a robe. The final test was an 18-day period when he could not leave the lodge – one can look at this period as a seal of the dervish's new rank as an elder.

After this final 18-day period had ended, the temporary ritual attire that the aspirant had used to learn the turning ritual was replaced by another set of clothing. There was a celebratory meal in the evening when an 18-branch candelabra was lit, symbolizing the various kinds of tasks he had performed. After the meal, there was a special ceremony in which the new dervish was crowned with his own felt wool hat, approximately 45–50 cm high, made of two layers of felted wool. In a very real sense, this hat was a badge of rank for the new dervish. (The most serious punishment for a wayward Mevlevi was to have his hat confiscated.) Then the new dervish was either given a small room in that lodge with a window, small fireplace, a bed and a chair for visitors, or transferred to another Mevlevi lodge. In any case he received a small stipend from the income of the lodge. Some returned to their families and began careers, often as musicians at the Ottoman court. There was no contradiction in working in the world while continuing one's sufi practices.

Today newly appointed Mevlevi teachers are expected to do an 18-day retreat in the Konya lodge. Ibrahim Gamard,<sup>17</sup> who kindly clarified many questions I had concerning the 1001-day retreat, was given verbal authorization by the hereditary head of the Mevlevi lineage, Faruk Chelebi Efendi. Ibrahim then did a modified retreat in a hotel in Konya for 18 days, had daily contact with a friend of his, who was a Mevlevi teacher, and was allowed to do some symbolic acts of service at Mevlana's Mausoleum. Some time later in Istanbul there was a ceremony of Mevlevi prayers, followed by a new shaykh's turban being placed on his head. Then he was given a written authorization to teach, written in Ottoman calligraphy and signed by Chelebi Efendi.

What happened to the 1001-day retreat? The retreat now is the retreat of one's daily life, the integration of Mevlevi ethics and character practised in everyday life combined with communal Mevlevi meditation and ritual

turning ceremonies, according to what is possible in each person's particular circumstances. Here we have a textbook example of a major change in contemplative practice in less than a century. Atatürk had this to say to Abdulhalim Chelebi of Konya and Vice President of the First House of Representatives:

You, the Mevlevis have made a great difference by combating ignorance and religious fundamentalism for centuries, as well as making contributions to science and the arts. However we are obliged not to make any exceptions and must include Mevlevi tekkes [sufi lodges]. Nonetheless, the ideas and teaching of Mevlana will not only exist forever, but they will emerge even more powerfully in the future.<sup>18</sup>

Atatürk may very well have been correct in his prediction. Until proper anthropological research is done, which would potentially be illegal, it seems premature to categorize Mevlevi activities in one way or the other. Perhaps the best way to protect Mevlevi practice in Turkey is to pretend that it does not happen any more; it is simply one more cultural-educational organization registered with the government.

- 9 For an excellent translation of the discourses of Nizamuddin see Bruce B. Lawrence, *Nizamuddin Auliya: Morals for the Heart* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1992).
- 10 From author's fieldwork, 1986–2000.
- 11 'Abd ur-Rahman Jami, *Lawa'ih, A Treatise On Sufism*, trans. E. H. Whinfield and M. M. Kazvini (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1914), p. 2. In a more modern translation of Jami's *Lawa'ih* by William Chittick, 'Make these imaginal forms into the mirror of Your beauty's self-disclosures, not the cause of veiling and distance', in Sachiko Murata, *Chinese Gleams of Sufi Light: Wang Tai-Yu's Great Learning of the Pure and Real* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), p. 132. This latter translation is from the sufi vocabulary of Jami, not a supplication the Prophet would have made.
- 12 Buehler, *Sufi Heirs*, p. 2.
- 13 Ibid., p. 144, fn 67.

## 6 SUFI VARIETIES OF TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE: TRANSFORMATION OF THE EGO-SELF

- 1 Jack Kornfield's paraphrase of the original Abhaya Sutta, 'And who is the person who, subject to death, is not afraid or in terror of death?'. Abhaya Sutta available at <http://www.accesstosight.org/tipitaka/an/an04/an04.184.than.html> (accessed 3 November 2015). Jack Kornfield, *Buddha's Little Instruction Book* (New York: Bantam Books, 1994), p. 88.
- 2 Badi' uz-Zaman Furuzanfar, *Ahadith-i Mathnawi*, 3rd edn (Tehran: Amir Kabir, 1983), p. 116.
- 3 Sri Mungala Venkataramiah, *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, 7th edn (Tiruvannamalai: Sri Ramanasramam, 1984), p. 160.
- 4 This useful nuance of 'chanted verse' comes from Bruce B. Lawrence, 'The early Chishti approach to Sama', in M. Israel and N. K. Wagle (eds), *Islamic Society and Culture: Essays in Honour of Professor Aziz Ahmad* (Delhi: Manohar, 1983), p. 72.
- 5 Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), p. 37.
- 6 A quote from al-Qushayri (d. 1072) in Carl Ernst, 'The theory and practice of Sama' (listening to music) in the sufi circle of Burhan al-Din Gharib', in Proceedings of the 1987 Conference on Amir Khusrau. Available at [www.http://aksa.us/akconference.html](http://aksa.us/akconference.html) (accessed 22 October 2015). Unpaginated.
- 7 Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, p. 38.
- 8 Nicolaas Biegan, *Living Sufism: Sufi Rituals in the Middle East and the Balkans* (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2009), pp. 34–6. This book has many colour photos of sufis doing various forms of remembrance of God.
- 9 Ibid., pp. 75–8.
- 10 Ibid., pp. 79–80.
- 11 Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, pp. 28–33.
- 12 For details see Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Shaykh* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), 1998.
- 13 Lest anyone think that Naqshbandis or other sufis have a monopoly on the system of subtle centres, Chinese Taoists have known for thousands of years about subtle centres (*dantiens*), the connection between the heart and the point between the middle of the eyes (the *yintang*) and much, much more.
- 14 Personal communication (2 March 2014).
- 15 There is a video of the turning ritual available at <http://mevlanafoundation.org>.

- com/mevlevi\_order\_en.html that shows this line and the centre pivot place for the shaykh (accessed 2 September 2013).
- 16 Metin And, 'The Mevlana ceremony [Turkey]', *The Drama Review* 21/3 (1977), p. 84 [83–94].
  - 17 His website is a useful resource for Rumi's *Mathnawi*, *Diwan*, and a variety of Mevlevi topics. Available at [www.dar-al-masnavi.org](http://www.dar-al-masnavi.org) (accessed 3 November 2015). I have relied on his personal communications and website for this section.
  - 18 Available at [http://mevlanafoundation.com/mevlevi\\_order\\_en.html](http://mevlanafoundation.com/mevlevi_order_en.html), at the end of the page (accessed 2 September 2013).

## 7 TWO CONTEMPORARY WOMEN SUFI TEACHERS

- 1 See Shakina Reinhertz, *Women Called to the Path of Rumi: The Way of the Whirling Dervish* (Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, 2001). Women's participation in the Mevlevi rituals seems to have waned in nineteenth-century Turkey.

## AFTERWORD: FUTURE SCENARIOS FOR SUFI PRACTICE – GUESSES FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

- 1 See Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), p. 220.
- 2 One exception is Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, *Leading from the Emerging Future: From Ego-System to Eco-System Economies* (San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2013), pp. 18, 67–9. They make it appear, however, that increasing awareness is almost as easy as changing clothes!
- 3 See the section entitled, 'Bringing awareness to contemplative studies' at the end of the chapter in Arthur F. Buehler, 'Sufi contemplation: 'Abdullah Shah's *Suluk-i Mijaddidiyya*', in Louis Komjathy (ed.), *Contemplative Literature: A Comparative Sourcebook on Meditation and Contemplative Prayer* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 324–27, for a brief summary of the study of transformative practice in the academy.
- 4 At least one exception is John Welwood, *Toward a Psychology of Awakening: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Path of Personal and Spiritual Transformation* (Boston, MA: Shambhala, 2002). It is rare to find a scholar of sufism who uses the term 'transpersonal'. Transpersonal psychology as a concept has not yet arrived in the wider area of sufi studies.
- 5 For a discussion of how the study of sufism could be brought from its present egocentric focus to something significantly more meaningful, see Arthur F. Buehler, 'Researching sufism in the 21st century: Expanding the context of inquiry', in Clinton Bennett (ed.), *The Continuum Companion Volume on Islam* (London: Continuum, 2013), pp. 93–118.