

Living Presence

What's in it for me? Learn how to live at one with the world.

We live in exciting and precarious times. Technology and markets have dissolved the barriers between nations and amplified our impact on the planet. Our fates are converging, and yet our understanding of life's meaning remains fractured. As our power grows, so does our neuroticism, shame, and alienation. We're in dire need of guidance. Fortunately, the ancient tradition of Islamic mysticism known as Sufism can help. Follow its teaching to live in the here and now and connect to an infinite spirit, and you'll see how embracing this living presence can break you out of your narrow awareness and tame the discontent that is driven by your ego. Discover the guide that has been within you all along. In these blinks, you'll learn

how to make the ego the servant of your true, essential self; why Sufi reality mirrors physics; and how to find courage in humility.

Sufism is a practice of Islam that strives to experience a reality of divine interconnection.

Picture yourself in a city dense with fog. Its tendrils cling to the streets, spreading darkness everywhere. The people around you move about in shadow. The inhabitants of this city are constricted by fear. No matter their accomplishments, they carry a deep sense of failure and alienation. Now travel beyond the city. You find yourself in a village where people strive to be kind yet are haunted by fears of their own insignificance. Journey further away still and you meet the warriors. The warriors have conquered their fears through the realization that life is divine. Continue yet further and you finally arrive with the saints. The saints have not only realized that life is divine, but they also live every moment with the awareness of this knowledge. They surrender themselves to the all-present divinity. The key message here is: Sufism is a practice of Islam that strives to experience a reality of divine interconnection. To a Sufi, this imagined journey from alienation to surrender to the divine isn't simply a spiritual one. It isn't just a metaphysical aspiration; it's a journey to fully embrace physical reality. In Sufism, all things, and living things in particular, share an essence, or infinite spirit. The spirit creates, connects, and transforms them. So in this way, all things are both individual phenomena and manifestations of the infinite spirit. For a Sufi, reality is oneness.

What's more, this view of reality sits in harmony with our modern scientific understanding of the world. In physics, reality is an electromagnetic field. Within the field, subatomic particles vibrate with energy, and this energy draws elements together. The elements transform one another, enabling organic life. Consider a rose, for example. The energy within the rose brings sun, water, and minerals together to make it bloom. It's the same for humans. The energy within us powers our minds; it allows us to have an awareness of the energy itself. In contemporary Sufi teaching, this energy, that manifests through all things in the electromagnetic field, is the infinite spirit revealing itself throughout existence. But this fit with scientifically approved models of reality is beside the point. Sufism isn't primarily concerned with arguing the truth. Sufism is about experience. And the most important experience a person can have is presence.

Maintaining awareness in the present moment opens you up to the infinite spirit.

In the early days of his spiritual journey, the author studied under a Sufi teacher, or shaikh. One day, the shaikh instructed him to brush a horse. The author – a kid from New Jersey – had no idea how to groom a horse. But he spent hours on the job. He groomed from the mane to the tail, from the hooves up to the ears. While working he noticed his own body, his arms, his feet, his breath, his heartbeat. And his senses filled with the smell, sight, and feel of the horse too. His awareness took in a single strand of the horse's mane right through to the animal itself and the space around it. And yet, he did a really sloppy job. And when the shaikh returned, he told him so. But the shaikh also smiled. He could see that the author had worked with total absorption. The key message here is: Maintaining awareness in the present moment opens you up to the infinite spirit. Presence is what the author glimpsed while grooming the horse that day. He'd given his all and connected to the horse, himself, the moment, and the spirit that bound these things together. And this presence opened him up to the infinite spirit that is reality. Sufism is a mystical faith transmitted through fables and poems, most famously by the thirteenth-century Persian writer, Jalaluddin Rumi. But it's also a practical faith that's meant for the everyday. Sufis hold jobs just like most people do. They build homes and teach classes. They cook and clean. But in this day-to-day, they strive to maintain an awareness of the present moment. Sufis also develop this presence through meditation, or what Rumi calls, "polishing the mirror of awareness." Think of your awareness as a mirror filled with the outer world: other people, things, ideas, and even your thoughts about those people, things, and ideas. With such a crowded picture, it can be hard to notice the mirror itself. But if you find a free moment and comfortable position to pay attention to your breath, heartbeat, and senses, and observe your emotions and thoughts without attaching to them, then you can begin to clear your mind. In these moments your mirror is clean and empty, and you reveal your mind's capacity for awareness as it really is: a living conduit to the infinite spirit.

End the tyranny of the compulsive, fearful ego, by surrendering to the love of the infinite spirit.

So far we've explored Sufism's concept of the infinite spirit, an energy more often known as God that connects and manifests through all things, ourselves included. But just as we embody the divine, we also have something of a villain lurking within us: the ego. In Sufism, the ego is your compulsive self. Seeking only to preserve itself, the ego stokes fear, resentment, judgment, and envy. It can't sustain mindful attention on any task so it flits about. And, it reads the world as either a threat to extinguish, or an angle to be played. For many people, the conscious mind is dominated by the ego. We are prey to our compulsions, guilt, and fear. Insecurity guides our actions. We use our intellect as a shield and weapon. It's a troublesome state of affairs. Luckily, there is another way. The key message here is: End the tyranny of the compulsive, fearful ego, by surrendering to the love of the infinite spirit. In Sufi Islam, all things, having been

created by the infinite spirit, have a good essence to them. The ego is no different. You developed your ego at a young age to cope with the challenges of life. To face adversity, your ego supplies you with crucial qualities: aspiration, self-respect, and diligence. You need your ego. But it should serve, not rule you. To humble your ego you must develop presence, in other words, an awareness of the infinite spirit. The spirit wants the best for you and you must trust it, surrender, and submit to its love. But submission to this spirit isn't a one-and-done deal. Daily life is full of challenges – including money troubles, health problems, and all manner of real and perceived threats that can awaken your self-important, survivalist ego. Conflict is inevitable, but when the world triggers your ego, you should work to return to presence. Remember the connection between your individual self and the divine. Allow yourself to be humbled, reassured, and loved, and your ego will release its hold. When that compulsive self is hushed only then can you go on and face your challenges.

Suffering is an opportunity to transform yourself and the world around you.

There was once a king who was generous to all people, so long as they could observe a moment's silence. One day the king gave to widows, the next he gave to the blind, and on the day after that he gave to poor students. But one poor student couldn't help but whine as the king approached, and so the student received nothing. On the next day, the student feigned illness and waited for the king, because on that day the king would give to the sick. But again, the student couldn't quiet his whining and so he got nothing. Next, he disguised himself as a widow, then as a blind man, and so on, but each and every time he whined at the king's approach. Day after day, he left empty-handed. Eventually, the student came up with a better disguise. He wrapped himself in a death shroud and lay still by the side of the road. The king passed and placed gold pieces on the body for the burial, at which the student emerged and said, "You gave me something after all!" "Yes," replied the king, "but first you had to die." The key message here is: Suffering is an opportunity to transform yourself and the world around you. In this parable, even though the student suffered in ways that were real, he also suffered from a resentment that the world wasn't as his ego demanded. To receive the king's grace he first had to release the disappointments of his ego. Human suffering is much the same. To answer it, you must first overcome the imaginary suffering of your ego. You can do this by admitting your limits and facing the world as it is. From here, you can see how you have to change in order to change your circumstances. Consider some of the great change agents of recent history: Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Malcolm X. Each expressed deep humility. They humbled themselves to history, to the urgency of their cause, and to their own humanity. This humility was their strength. Not only did it draw people to them, but it allowed them to become part of the transformation they sought in the world. By developing presence, you too can defeat your imagined sufferings and affect real change. What's more, as you're about to find out, you'll absorb the love of the spirit.

When you're in love with the infinite spirit, you realize your unity with it.

There was once a poor man who loved God and would spend his days beneath a tree in a park, whispering, "Oh God, God, God . . ." One day, a stranger passed and laughed at the poor man. "God's not answering you," the stranger said. These words cut the poor man to the quick. He felt alone, and he wept and wept until he raised his eyes and beheld an angel. "Brother," the angel said, "the Lord wants you to know that your calling him is his answer to you." At first glance, these words seem to reveal an indifference of the universe to loneliness and need. But, the truth is precisely the opposite. The angel's words reveal the love of the universe. The key message here is: When you're in love with the infinite spirit, you realize your unity with it. To unpack the story of the poor man in the park, take a moment to consider how love works. Love begins as attraction. Someone catches your eye. You see something in that person that others miss. If you're lucky, she sees something special in you, too. The attraction becomes a sort of gravitational pull and you're drawn to each other. But it's not enough to simply look. Love demands that you get to know each other, that you share yourselves with each other. In the greatest moments, your boundaries dissolve and you both feel as though you are one. You feel truly alive. Love of the infinite spirit is the same. As you go about your life, certain moments will arrest you. You sense that there's something more. Past the veil of perception, you glimpse an essence and are drawn to it. Just as this spirit created you, it loves you back. And as with love between people, simply observing the spirit isn't enough. You long to devote yourself and to realize yourself in relation to it, to belong to it. In the greatest moments, the boundaries between you and the spirit dissolve into unity. But what does this mean, to unify with the infinite spirit? When you join the spirit, your love for this world and its people grows. You become able to love yourself, not in the vain and uneasy manner of your ego, but with true kindness, generosity, and patience.

When you reflect the spirit in each moment, you're able to channel its creative energy.

A master of Balinese dance once described his experience of performance. The dancers gather on stage and the audience gives its attention. This attention becomes like a ball of energy held between the audience and the dancers. The dancers then begin to dance. Through both their skill, which is the result of countless hours of mindful work, and their commitment to the moment, which is a form of presence, the dancers manipulate the ball of energy. It grows larger. It changes shape. Qualities appear and disappear – excitement, calm, sorrow, joy. But always, the energy is returned to the audience and back to the dancers. The dance isn't for one or the other. To claim it would interrupt the flow of energy. Instead, the dance is an offering to the world. The key message here is: When you reflect the spirit in each moment, you're able to channel its creative energy. Do you remember from a previous blink that energy is the capacity to make things happen? Energy within seemingly inert matter, such as a plank of wood in a stage, allows that plank to hold together in resistance to entropy. Energy enables the feet of the dancers to move upon that wooden stage. Energy within the audience members allows them to focus their attention. And energy allows the dancers to sense that attention and respond with performance. Energy is within everyone. It's a property of the electromagnetic field of existence. It's a creative force that everyone can channel, just as the Balinese dancers do. But in channeling this creative energy, there are a few things to keep in mind. First, while the energy is within you, you don't possess it. It

possesses you. The greatest hope in art is to clear the channel and express the energy. Second, craft and skill matter. You have to put in the work of learning your art in order to polish the mirror of awareness and reflect the creative force. Third, while you may become a master of craft, you can't claim the qualities of the creative energy as your own because that would allow your ego to interrupt the circuit and stop the current. Finally, art that's created without love is lifeless, because it fails to reflect the spirit's love of creation. Channel the creative force of the universe by first loving the task of creation.

Awareness of the infinite spirit inspires service to others.

Presence for Sufis is a practice of mindfulness that reveals the reality beyond the veil of appearances and the chattering of the ego. That reality is the loving energy of the infinite spirit, or God. When you join the spirit, you lower the barriers between yourself and the world and your love grows. You become both more sensitive to the needs around you and more eager and able to respond. This includes being able to respond to the needs of other people, other creatures, and the environment. But, sometimes connecting to the infinite spirit to better serve others is easier said than done. The key message here is: Awareness of the infinite spirit inspires service to others. Often, when you choose to pay attention to the obvious needs around you, it can feel scary. You may fear that if you let the problems of the world in – the hunger, the violence, the environmental degradation – you'll drown in them. This fear is the ego protecting itself. The desperate cries of protest within you indicate that you're refusing something greater and unknown. But have faith. To love the spirit is to love the truth. And as when you humble yourself to reality, you can accept grace and find the strength to become heroic. Of course, the ego isn't easily quieted. It can resurge, infiltrate, and commandeer your acts of service. So how can you tell whether you're serving others as an act of the spirit or an act of the ego? First, remember that everyone is interconnected. Taking advantage of others never leads to sustainable well-being. Nothing true is easy, and happiness comes from sacrifice and work. Second, an act of service inspired by presence is a channeling of the infinite spirit. It ought to increase your capacity for love. If something leaves you feeling embittered, resentful, or filled with an uneasy self-importance, then you know you're in the realm of the ego. By contrast, an act of service that's inspired by presence is a force of kind, patient, and generous love. That love will mobilize your intelligence, gather your focus, and fortify your will. This doesn't mean you won't make mistakes, but a mistake of love is better than a passionless one, no matter how correct or high-minded. Above all, if in doubt, return to presence. When you do, you can't go far wrong.

Final summary

The key message in these blinks: Sufism is an Islamic tradition that seeks an awareness of and devotion to the infinite spirit. This spirit, more often called God, manifests through all things. It's the essential reality of the universe. By developing a sense of presence, and growing a mindfulness practice that opens you to the infinite spirit, you can quiet your fearful ego, find love for yourself and others, and channel that love into acts of creativity and service. And here are a final few words of guidance: Let worship come naturally. The day-to-day religious practices of the Sufi are rich and diverse and

go back 13 centuries. Perhaps you've heard of the whirling dervishes, for example – Sufis who turn on their feet as a form of prayer. But, Sufism isn't rigid in its rituals. Sufis believe that right action, including the worship of God, flows from presence. Developing presence in daily life and meditation, surrendering yourself to love, and serving others are all acts of sincere devotion or worship. And what is worship if not recognizing reality through selflessness?