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chapter 9 - bahai sufi spiritual practices

Chapter 9 – Baha'i and Sufi Spiritual Practices

by Michael McCarron

In the preceding we have read about how the Sufis and Baha'is viewed the universe that they inhabit. How the cosmology has impacted their world view and their view of the Divine. How the creative emanative outpouring of the manifestation of Being has been envisioned by them. Now we will take a brief look at another similar aspect that of Spiritual Practices. Both Sufis and Baha'is have adapted spiritual practices that are very similar. This may be due to the nature of Baha' Allah frequenting Sufi gatherings, living amongst Sufis as such in Iraqi Kurdistan. We have seen how Baha' Allah was in regular communication with Sufis, some Sufis were amongst his earliest followers so it is not without surprise that some practices would have been carried over in the Baha'i Teachings, as well the early period of the Baha'i religion was represented to other Muslims as a Sufi order rather than a new religion having its own Shari'a (laws). Most Sufi practices are comprised majorly of Recitation (dhikr), Meditation (muraqaba), Accounting (muhasaba), Audition (sama') and Prayer (salat). All of which are aimed at purifying (latafa) the spiritual centers (lata'if) or chakras within each human being. In the following I will discuss the spiritual centers briefly before going through the Sufi and Baha'i writings on the spiritual practices.

The Spiritual Centers (Lata'if)

According to the Sufis there are subtle spiritual centers in the human body, some write of five centers, some of seven. In essence they are very similar to Hindu Tantric ideas of the Chakra system. Jamal Elias research on the Lata'if has uncovered that they go back in Sufi thought to the classic period with the first appearance in the writings of Tustari in 896CE and Hallaj in 992CE, subsequently to them they have appeared in Gazzali, Ibn Arabi, Kashani, Simnani, Shah Wali Allah and form a major part in the soteriology of the Naqshbandiyya. However, defining the lata'if or latifa is far more difficult for the academics:

"...Dikhuda's Persian 'Lughatnama' refers to latifa as a technical term. He states that in the understanding of the mystics it is a subtle reference, the conceptualization of which cannot be explained. He goes on to define the term latifa-i insaniyya as something which the philosophers call the rational soul and the mystics refer to as the heart, but which is in reality the spirit." (Jamal Elias, *The Throne Carriers of God*, pg. 158)

Others have written long discourses on the Lata'if. Such as Shah Wali Allah who holds that there are lata'if on three different levels of Being:

"This system was based on the idea that the human being had ten parts—five material, five immaterial. The lower level of the material parts consisted of the Lower Soul (nafs) and the four elements (fire, air, earth, and water), while the higher level consisted of the five lata'if, sometimes called the 'five jewels' (al-jawahir al-khams): the Heart (qalb), Spirit (ruh), Mystery (sirr), Arcane (khafi), and the Super-Arcane (akhfa). The two levels of this Naqshbandi system were said to correspond respectively to the distinction between the World of God's Creation ('alam al-Khalq) and the World of God's Command ('alam al-'amr), a distinction based on Qur'anic terminology and having a long history in Sufi thought. For example, the Qur'anic verse (17:85) 'the Spirit is from the command of my Lord' (al-ruh min amr rabbi) is taken by the Sufis to mean that the ruh, or human spirit, comes from an immaterial timeless realm of God's command ('amr) which precedes physical manifestation. It is interesting to note that the five-fold structure of the lata'if according to the Naqshbandiyya-

Mujaddidiyya seems to parallel the model of the Islamic version of Greek medical theory (tibb) in which there are five inner and five outer senses.[23] The model of the lata'if which appeared early in Sufism clearly developed and was refined over time. Najmuddin al-Razi (d. 1256), a Kubrawiyya Sufi of Iran and author of the *Mirsad al-`ibad*, formulated a system of five lata'if and found a Qur'anic basis of the terms *sirr* and *khafi*—Qur'an 20:7, 'if thou makest utterance aloud, verily He knows the secret (*sirr*) and what is more hidden (*khafi*)."[24] `Ala ad-Daula Simnani (d. 1336), whose works influenced Sirhindi, expanded the system of Najmuddin al-Razi to a seven-fold one by adding below the five lata'if the concept of a physical form or mold (*qalab*) and above them a further center called the *haqiyya* or *ananiyya*. Sirhindi's model then expanded to represent the lata'if as part of a distinct set of symbols and practices (see figs. 1 and 2),[25] and this was finally developed by Shah Wali Allah into a three-tiered model with a total of some fifteen components" (SHAH WALI ALLAH'S THEORY OF THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTERS (LATA'IF): A SUFI MODEL OF PERSONHOOD AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION by Marcia K. Hermansen, SDSU)

The purification of the lata'if is the purpose of the spiritual practices in Sufism. By going down the Sufi path one is actively cleansing the *latifa* of each *maqamat*. Shah Wali Allah writes regarding this:

Shah Wali Allah describes the way to purify the Spirit (*ruh*) as the observance of ritual purity at all times, Qur'an recitation, mystical exercises, and cultivating an intuitive relationship with the souls of the saints. The Mystery (*sirr*) is awakened by contemplating God's attributes, meditating on His names and silent and wordless *dhikr* (remembrance of the divine names and attributes).[62] It can be seen that Wali Allah associates practices of a more 'mental' nature with the *sirr*, which is, of course, related to the center 'aql (Intelligence) rather than Heart (emotion). In *Altaf al-Quds*, he observes that there are three ways to recognize the cultivation (*tahdhib*) of the lata'if: 1. once this is achieved, the person will find delight and pleasure in the things specific to each *latifa*; 2. he may exhibit particular behavior and a developmental stage specific to a certain *latifa*. Thus, the man of certainty has mastered the Intelligence, while the person of ecstasy and longing has mastered the Heart, and so on; 3. a person may see visions (*waqi'at*) which demonstrate that certain lata'if have been cultivated or purified.[63] According to Shah Wali Allah, the Seeker (*salik*), after completing the journey through the spiritual centers, finally is dominated by the same *latifa* which was originally strongest in his nature (*fitra*). Thus, one whose Heart is strong will primarily master states of ecstasy, longing, and disquietude, even though all of his lata'if have been completely awakened. The means of cultivating lata'if beyond the *ruh* and *sirr* is not gone into in detail by Shah Wali Allah, but it apparently occurs through gnostic contemplation leading to loss of self in the universal, rather than in overcoming conflict through spiritual practices enjoined to curb animalistic tendencies. This concurs with his metaphysical explanation that conflict at lower states is later superseded by the attraction of the one universal force or beneficial purpose (*muṣlaḥa kullīyya*). In his description of the Sufi terms *fana* (annihilation) and *baqa* (subsistence), as well as the states (*ahwal*) and the stages (*maqamat*), Shah Wali Allah incorporates his understanding of the lata'if. He explains that if the person attends to his worship over time, each of the centers will absorb its portion of this worship, and the naturally low animalistic attributes will change to virtuous angelic ones. When these attributes become firmly established, the person's acts will continuously manifest them, and then they are called 'the stages' (*maqamat*). On the other hand, if these attributes appear on occasion and then fade away and do not last for very long they are called 'states' (*ahwal*) or moments (*awqat*).[65] Shah Wali Allah's description of the initial stages of progress and the aptitudes of spiritual aspirants based on the natural preponderance of their lata'if follows the synthesis of Sufi manuals with Aristotelian theories of the soul. At the level of basic functioning the Lower Soul (*nafs*) follows after physical requirements, the Heart is responsible for emotions and judgements based on its response of attraction or repulsion, and the Intellect recollects the past and plans for the future. At the moral level if the Lower Soul or the Heart comes to dominate the Intellect this will lead to problems of character and behavior. (SHAH WALI ALLAH'S THEORY OF THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTERS (LATA'IF): A SUFI MODEL OF PERSONHOOD AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION by Marcia K. Hermansen, SDSU)

Baha'i Purification:

In al-Kitab al-Aqdas the term latafah is found which means to purify and we see how similar the Baha'i Thought is to that of that of Shah Wali Allah's.

"KA Paragraph 74. 'Adopt ye such usages as are most in keeping with refinement'. Note 158 This is the first of several passages referring to the importance of refinement and cleanliness. The original Arabic word "látafah", rendered here as "refinement", has a wide range of meanings with both spiritual and physical implications, such as elegance, gracefulness, cleanliness, civility, politeness, gentleness, delicacy and graciousness, as well as being subtle, refined, sanctified and pure. In accordance with the context of the various passages where it occurs in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, it has been translated either as "refinement" or "cleanliness". (Note 158, Al-Kitab al-Aqdas)

It should be noted that Baha' Allah does not go into details on the lata'if, there is no comparable discourse regarding each individual latifa. Although at times each is mentioned. For instance the heart is seen as the pentacle of belief:

O SON OF SPIRIT!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart (qalb), that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting. (Arabic Hidden Words #1)

In one important work, echoing back to Shah Wali Allah, we see how the path itself is a reference to the Lata'if for the lata'if are also known as the philosophers stones:

"Then when the light by which He guides conjoins the light to which one is guided, the person sees the realm of the heavens and the earth and he perceives the secret of destiny (qadar)—how it controls created things—and this is His, may He be exalted, saying: 'Light upon Light'" (24:35)[43] The Philosophers' Stone (al-hajar al-baht), a center of the alluded to by Shah Wali Allah, particularly in the context of the Prophetic experience, is also found in Ibn 'Arabi's work. IN an unpublished letter, Wali Allah makes his source explicit by recounting that in the works of Ibn 'Arabi the name —'perplexing stone' (hajar-l-baht)—is applied to this latifa because of its marvelous and perplexing nature. Originally, the hajar-l-baht indicated a mysterious substance which used to be presented as a gift to princes and nobles. It could not be classified as vegetable, mineral, and so on, and this latifa similarly possesses amazing properties. Ibn 'Arabi, in his treatise al-Tadbirat, discusses the Philosophers' Stone as one of the human 'stones' (ajjar), using stone in the sense of 'jewel,' jewels (jawahir) being a term used by other Sufis to refer to the lata'if. According to Ibn 'Arabi, the Philosophers' Stone is

"an essential point in the heart, equivalent to the pupil in the eye which is the locus of vision...; if there is rust on the heart the existence of this stone will not be manifest. All of the spirits (arwah) which are in the human being, such as Intelligence and others, anticipate the witnessing of this point. Thus, when the heart becomes polished through meditation, dhikr, and [Qur'an] recitation then this point will become apparent. When it manifests that in it which parallels the essential presence of God, there spreads out from that point alight because of the theophany, and it flows to all corners of the physical body and perplexes the mind and more. Then the light and its rays fill this stone, dazzling them."

Later in the same passage, Ibn 'Arabi associates this experience with the mystical state of subsistence (baqa), a state which is connected with the role of the prophet, again confirming Wali Allah's association of

this latifa with the side of his model representing 'Prophetic Inheritance.' (Hermansson)

Baha' Allah mentions the philosophers stone in the context of the true believer:

In one sense, they indicate that no true Shi'is exist. Even as he hath said in another passage: "A true believer is likened unto the philosopher's stone." Addressing subsequently his listener, he saith: "Hast thou ever seen the philosopher's stone?" Reflect, how this symbolic language, more eloquent than any speech, however direct, testifieth to the non-existence of a true believer. Such is the testimony of Sádiq. And now consider, how unfair and numerous are those who, although they themselves have failed to inhale the fragrance of belief, have condemned as infidels those by whose word belief itself is recognized and established. (Bahau'llah, <http://www.ibiblio.org/Bahai/Texts/EN/IQA/IQA-1.html>)

It should also be noted that there is a work by Baha' Allah titled "Jawahir Asrar" (Secret Jewels) which relates to the path one must tread to achieve purification, its introduction records about the mysteries:

The essence of the divine mysteries in the journeys of ascent set forth for those who long to draw nigh unto God, the Almighty, the Ever-Forgiving - blessed be the righteous that quaff from these crystal streams!

In conclusion to this section we now see that the Sufis believe in subtle spiritual centers the purpose of the transformation on the Path is to purify these spiritual centers which is also seen in the teachings of the Baha'i Faith. Now we will take a look at the spiritual practices themselves beginning with Remembrance (dhikr).

DHIKR:

Dhikr ذكّر, Plural اذكار Adhkaar

(Zikir in [Turkish](#) and [Malay](#), Zikr in [Urdu](#), Jikir in [Bengali](#) and Zekr in [Persian](#)) ([Arabic](#)"pronouncement", "invocation" or "remembrance") is an [Islamic](#) practice that focuses on the remembrance of [God](#). Dhikr as a devotional act often includes the repetition of the [names of Allah](#), supplications and aphorisms from [hadith](#) literature and sections of the [Qur'an](#). (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dhikr>)

Dhikr is a repetition using the breath to recite names of Allah, or a Mantra, one such popular mantra in Sufism is "La Illah Illa Allah" (There is no god but God). Which in the Baha'i Faith is similar to "Ya Baha ul Abha" (Oh, Glory, Most-Glorious), although the more informal "La illah illa Anti" (there is no God, but You), is also used in Baha'i tradition. In many Sufi tariqahs a dhikr is given to each adherent when they first enter the order. Similarly each Baha'i has a Dhikr they perform. It can also double as a form of greeting. For instance Ni'matullahi Sufis greet each other with Ya Haqq (Oh, Most-Real), the Bahai's greet each other with "Allahu Abha"(God is the Most-Glorious). Another form of dhikr is that of using tasbeih beads, like in Buddhism, this is a set of beads on a string for counting recitations in Sufism there are 99 beads for each of the Names of God, in the Baha'i Faith there are 95 such beads. Additionally, in the Baha'i Faith the assembly hall where adherents gathered is named after dhikr in it's superlative form Mashriqul-Adhkar (Dawning Point of Remembrance, مشرق الأذكار البهائي). [For more on Sufi and Baha'i Dhikr see Steve Scholl's "Remembrance of God", <http://www.scribd.com/doc/8979361/Remembrance-of-God>]

Sama':

Sema or sama ([Arabic](#): سماع) is a term that means *hearing*. It is used, as a borrowed word in [Persian](#), to refer to some of the ceremonies used by various [Sufi](#) orders and often involves prayer, song, dance, and other ritualistic activities. Sema dancing is known to Europeans as the dance of the [Whirling Dervishes](#) (see [Sufi whirling](#)), although many forms of sema do not include whirling. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sama>)

Sama' is the communal celebration of dhikr and other rituals regarding the divine. This is practiced in various manners by Sufis. It is also known as a "Nineteen Day Feast" in the Baha'i Faith.

"As to the Nineteen Day Feast, it rejoiceth mind and heart. If this feast be held in the proper fashion, the friends will, once in nineteen days, find themselves spiritually restored, and endued with a power that is not of this world." ([Abdu'l-Bahá](#): Selection from the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 91)

Muraqaba:

Muraqaba (Arabic: مراقبة) is the [Sufi](#) word for [meditation](#). Literally it is an [Arabic](#) term which means "to watch over", "to take care of", or "to keep an eye". [Metaphorically](#), it implies that with meditation, a person watches over or takes care of his spiritual heart (or [soul](#)), and acquires knowledge about it, its surroundings, and its creator. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muraqabah>)

[`Abdu'l-Bahá](#) is quoted as saying:

"Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries to your mind. In that state man abstracts himself: in that state man withdraws himself from all outside objects; in that subjective mood he is immersed in the ocean of spiritual life and can unfold the secrets of things-in-themselves." (^ [Abdu'l-Bahá](#) (1995) [1912]. [Paris Talks](#). Bahá'í Distribution Service. pp. 175. [ISBN 1870989570](#).)

Muhasaba:

Muhasaba (Self-Reckoning) is the sufi practice of evaluating on a daily basis our actions and what their moral worth was and trying to be a more moral person. The Encyclopedia of Islam writes regarding Muhasabah:

"The third form of the root hsb was to be used in Sufism, in a sense which is no longer eschatological but spiritual, to indicate the account of his conscience which the devout person presents to God. Hence arose the by name of al-Muhasibi, given to Harith b. Asad: 'he who excels in the examination of his conscience.' pg. 466 EI Vol III

This is reflected in the Baha'i Faith:

O SON OF BEING! Bring thyself to account (hasiba nafska) each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds. (Arabic Hidden Words #31)

In conclusion to this section we see direct parallels between spiritual practices in Sufism and the Baha'i Faith the goal of which is to aid the adherent on the Path of Purification (tasawwuf). From these kernels of knowledge we can begin to see the development of a unique Baha'i Sufi practice as well.

Ṣalāt (Arabic: صلاة; pl. ṣalawāt) is the name given to the formal prayer of Islam. The prayer is one of the obligatory rites of the religion, to be performed five times a day by a practising Muslim. Its supreme importance for Muslims is indicated by its status as one of the [Five Pillars](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Five_Pillars).
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salah>

One of the key components to the Sufi salat is that of the repetition of al-Fatiha, the Opening, this is the first chapter of the Quran. It is also used in the liturgy of the Naqshbandi and other sufi orders as part of dhikr:

Al-Fatiha

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful (1)

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds, (2) The Beneficent, the Merciful. (3) Owner of the Day of Judgment, (4) Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help. (5) Show us the straight path, (6) The path of those whom Thou hast favoured. Not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray. (7)

سُورَةُ الْفَاتِحَةِ

(بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ١)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ (٢) الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ (٣) مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ (٤) إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ
 وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ (٥) اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ (٦) صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ
 الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ (٧)

Prayer is also an important aspect in the Baha'i Teachings, according to Abdu'l-Baha':

We should speak in the language of heaven -- in the language of the spirit -- for there is a language of the spirit and heart. It is as different from our language as our own language is different from that of the animals, who express themselves only by cries and sounds. It is the language of the spirit which speaks to God. When, in prayer, we are freed from all outward things and turn to God, then it is as if in our hearts we hear the voice of God. Without words we speak, we communicate, we converse with God and hear the answer. ... All of us, when we attain to a truly spiritual condition, can hear the Voice of God. (<http://info.bahai.org/article-1-4-7-1.html>)

There are three obligatory prayers in the Baha'i teachings. One may choose one of the three obligatory prayers to say each day.

I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.

There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. (Revealed by Baha' Allah)

 arabic prayer text