



Coos Foundation

## An Introduction to Iranian Mysticism

Philosophically speaking, mysticism (*erfan* - gnosis) belongs to the category of cognition, but not cognition in the normal sense. Not a common, day-to-day consciousness of the external world, but knowledge of a world beyond the world of appearances. Not knowledge based on belief or reason, but one founded on direct, intuitive, instinctive perceptions. In other words, an inspired form of insight or an esoteric and personal knowledge flowing from within. But based on this definition, mysticism is an integral aspect of human thinking in general, and as long as human societies have existed, mystical thinking must have also existed alongside other forms of thought. Human beings, before thinking about religion or philosophy probably used this intuitive method of cognition more than common sense.

In earlier civilisations, when science and knowledge were limited, people relied more on intuition and imagination than reason or experience. In reaction to mysteries of life people resorted to intuitive and inspired forms of knowing. Mythologies of most ancient people show that under such conditions, inward looking and mystified thought is in fact the dominant form of thought. Before we can ask, therefore, what relationship mysticism has with religion or philosophy, we have to bear in mind that it was philosophy and religion which were affected by mysticism first. Mystic cognition predates religious or philosophical knowledge. In fact it is a characteristic of mystical thinking that it does not necessarily contradict or confront reason or belief. It does not belong to any specific type of people either. One can be a scientist with encyclopedic knowledge but also be a mystic thinker. A Moslem, Christian and Jew can have serious religious differences, but appreciate the same common mystical experience. In the history of Iranian mysticism we have numerous examples of how its greatest thinkers have always corresponded, visited, discussed and co-operated with mystics of other countries.

Historically, what we know today as Iranian mysticism refers to individuals and schools of thought belonging to the post-Islamic era. This should not, however, be taken to mean that emergence of Iranian mysticism was because of Islamization of Iran or that there was no mysticism before Islam. The roots of mystical thinking in Iran are visible even in the pre-Zoroastrian period, i.e., the period of Mithraism and the “Simorgh culture”. The Iranian people’s legendary Simorgh just spreads her wings to become the world of existence. Those created were, therefore, not a creation separate or inferior to the creator but part of a creator who had now become the created. In this ancient culture, the act of creation was not something outside of and separate from the universe. The essence of creation was thus supposed to exist within all of us. In such a culture, obviously esoteric knowledge becomes in effect one of the main paths to the truth.

Mysticism also existed in Greece; well before Christianity or philosophy. Even in the earliest stages of Greek philosophy, alongside the idealist and materialist schools you had some thinkers that were “neither this nor that “. Gnosticism was the name of one such school of mysticism. Its followers were called Gnostics. But Greek Gnosticism was itself influenced by the more ancient Persian Mithraism. After Alexander’s conquest of Iran, when Zoroastrianism the official religion of the defeated state was weakened, Mithraism began to grow once again amongst the Iranians. Many of the Alexander’s commanders themselves became converts to Mithraism and took its ideas back with them to Europe. Mithraism has also had an influence on the formation of Christian thought.

After the suppression of Mithraism within the two super-powers of the time, Rome and Persia, its practice was gradually uprooted. The influence of its ideas, however, did not disappear and even during the Islamic period its lasting influence could be observed. Some of its traditions continue even today. Winter solstice celebration which continued until sunrise was in fact the birth feast for Mithra, as from then on, the sun stayed in the sky a bit longer each day. Even Zoroastrianism, which in fact developed in opposition to Mithraism, had to recognize Mehr [Mithra] as one of the gods and it dedicated a month and a day in the year to him [21 Sep to 20 Oct]. The seven Amesha Spenta in Zoroastrianism or the seven day week are also related to the Mithra’s seven grades of initiation. Even, shaking hands when committing to an agreement is a Mithraist tradition.

Amongst ancient Greek thinkers Persia was known as “the land of Gnostics”. Many Greek philosophers visited Persia to become familiar with these ideas. Many centuries later when the Greek philosophical academies were shut down under pressure from the Christian Church, many of the Greek neo-Platonists and Gnostics which were being persecuted by the Romans in fact sought refuge either at Alexandria or the Sassanid state. Iranian thinkers were therefore well familiar with Greek philosophy before the Islamic era. Many books of Greek philosophy, including most of

Plato's work, no longer exist in their original Greek. What we have today are mostly Greek translations from Arabic which themselves were based on the earlier Sassanid Persian translations.

Alexander's age had a profound influence in bringing different cultures together. Religious movements in this period begin to move away from ethnic or national boundaries and take on a global meaning or significance. Manichaeism was one such world religion. Mani was preaching an idea capable of uniting all the different ethnic and religious groups under the Sassanid Empire. The Greek philosophers at the time considered his religion as a "Gnostic" one. Mani was well familiar with Greek thought and traces of not only Plato and Aristotle but also Alexandria's neo-Platonist ideas can be found in all his writings. In his religion you can observe elements from all ideas and religions of his time.

The *mazdakian* and *manavian* movements during the Sassanid period were both a reflection of popular anger against social and religious privileges introduced by them. In Mani's religion all were equal and one reached higher grades only through devotion. Mani saw the world based on two principles both of which he considered as eternal: darkness and light. Khodavandegar (the divine god) was the god of goodness and light whilst ahriman (satan) was the god of darkness. This duality in creation was also extended to the created. Human beings also had two contradictory souls at the same time. Opposed to the thoughts, sensations and intelligence emanating from the enlightened soul, there were also thoughts, sensations and intelligence coming from the dark side. Mani, for example, considered kindness, faith, patience and rationality to be products of the enlightened soul, whilst vengeance, anger, lust and impudence came from the dark soul.

Purification of the soul and strengthening the enlightened side in preparation for a return to the eternal light was the corner stone of his religion. For the devout Manichaeist, denouncing worldly goods, self-nullification, inner contemplation, and esoteric speculation, appreciation of beauty, cleanliness and goodliness was a way of life. In this religion, position, class and nationality played no role and reaching divinity was possible for all. It only depended on spiritual training and progression. He decorated his religious books with beautiful paintings so that the world of light will be appreciated in all its beauty.

Historical documents show that in the regions that later became Islamic, this religion was very influential during the few centuries before the emergence of Islam. Manichaeism had many followers, from Europe and Egypt to Central Asia and the Far East. The state religions of the time considered Manichaeism as a threat. By the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD its followers were persecuted to death in Persia, Rome and Egypt. But even after death of Mani and the long persecution of its followers their ideas continued to survive for centuries in both Asia and Europe.

All the available historical evidence shows that during the Islamic period, Iranians not only did not abandon their old beliefs altogether but actually tried with delicacy and skills to integrate them within the new beliefs. For example, 6 centuries after Islam, Attar, the important Iranian mystic thinker is not only still well familiar with the ancient Iranian cosmology but believes in it too. He writes:

Both Worlds are wings and feathers of Simorgh,  
But neither Simorgh nor her nest is no longer to be seen,  
You are the absolute Simorgh, on the qaf\* mountain close by,  
*\*[ qaf is a mythological mountain far away and not reachable by human beings where the elixir of life flows from a spring and Simorgh flies from the top of that mountain and by stretching her wings becomes the world]*  
The two worlds exist under your feathers and wings

Many of the other greats in Iranian mysticism of the Islamic era shared the same view as Attar and that is the belief in the existence of an essence of the absolute inside each and all of us. It would not therefore be surprising to know that Iranian mysticism after Islam grew first in North Eastern Iran. This was an area where due to its closeness to the Indo-European cultural roots, and despite the spread of Islam, memories of the old Aryan thoughts were still very alive and fresh. The grading of spiritual advancement which is common to most Iranian Sufi schools and usually has 7 stages was also very common amongst the Manichaean followers in Balkh since the time of Sassanids. In Attar's famous book, *Conference of the Birds*, the story of having to go through seven stages to reach the eternal light becomes symbolized in the story of a flock of birds in search of Simorgh who have to go through 7 stages to reach her nest on the Qaf mountain. But at the end Simorgh is nothing but the successful bird's own reflection in water. This reflects the same ancient belief in the development and transformation of the god or the creator into the world or the created and the existence of the divine in every living thing. Even in Zoroastrianism, although the creator is separated from the created and placed above the world of being, the divine can still give out his own Farr (divine essence) to the worthy few.

Despite this history, there is still a lot of controversy around the origins of Iranian mysticism during the Islamic era. Some consider it to be completely Islamic, some totally un-Islamic. Some Moslems consider whatever is non-Islamic as proof of heresy, whilst the non-believers consider whatever is Islamic is in fact not mysticism. Some consider its uniqueness to be the result of Buddhist influences; others find its roots in neo-Platonist philosophy. The Western Orientalists have found the roots of Iranian erfān in Alexandria, whilst those in search of the Aryan "race" deny all Greek or Arabic influences. Before accepting or refuting any of these theories certain realities must be looked at.

Iranian mysticism must have had some specifically Iranian characteristics, other-

wise, if it was simply Buddhist or Islamic, similar phenomenon would have existed in other Buddhist or Islamic countries. Or if its specificity was in neo-Platonist influences from the West, then the same ideas should have also been effective in the West, the source of these views. Undeniably, the ancient Iranian views, their common roots with other Indo-Aryan or Indo-European groups, the era of Sassanid Zoroastrianism and the period of reaction against it are all part of this history too. The nature of mysticism is such that essentially it cannot recognize any religious or national boundaries. From the beginnings, it has not only collaborated with other schools but has in fact flourished because of it. A major feature of Iranian mysticism is precisely its absorption of other cultures. It is therefore not wise to reduce Iranian mysticism only to one of its founding sources. In the same way, its Islamic aspect should not be forgotten either. This aspect is associated with the history of Sufism.

What we call Sufism today first arose out of Christian devotee circles residing in the areas in and around Baghdad since the Sassanid Empire. Some of these sects had denounced worldly goods and were leading a life of Christian abstinence, prayer and devotion in their convents. They used to wear rough cloth to get used to a rough life. The word Sufi comes from this origin. Sufi from the word suf meaning woolen was thus used to refer to those Moslem groups who similar to the earlier Christian sects wore rough cloths. In Persian we still use the same term "*pashmineh poosh*" ("woolen dressed") to refer to Sufis. The same principles of total devotion had by now become popular amongst Moslems in Baghdad too. The first Moslem Sufi groups were thus born.

In this early phase, Sufism was nothing but a return to the devotional and self-nullification trends within the earlier Islam itself. Especially towards the end of the Umayyad Caliphate, the idea for a return to the asceticism and purity of the original Islam had become very current. The Sufis of those early days were those who had reacted against the life of luxury practiced by the Umayyads and preached a life of self denunciation and devotion and a total trust in god's rewards for such deeds. Sufism was, therefore, at first, a kind of esoteric and internalized devotional order within Islam. It was a reaction against the pollution of Islam in the world power and caliphates.

This type of Sufism, characterized by its emphasis on self denunciation, total devotion and trust in God's rewards, has been termed "trusting" Sufism. It continues, more or less in the same form, to the present; not only in Iran but in most other Moslem countries. For this reason, some observers call Sufism a kind of "practical mysticism". Mysticism being more theoretical as it is concerned with epistemological question of what is the absolute truth, whilst Sufism already knows what it seeks and is simply showing the practical path towards it. However, those Sufis who already knew their ideal goal, obviously spent less time trying to recognize it. For them, therefore, entering the field of mysticism made no sense at all, be it theoretical or practical. One can be a Sufi but not a mystic; and vice versa. But as soon as this very

same non-mystic Sufism of Baghdad reaches the Persian mystics it rapidly becomes a weapon for reviving ancient Iranian ideas and confronting the official religion.

The Sufi schools of Baghdad had lost their vitality by the end of 4<sup>th</sup> century (11<sup>th</sup> AD). The main reason for this decline is the rise of great Iranian Sufi thinkers particularly in Khorasan. From the first period of Sufism in Baghdad nothing written remains other than scattered quotes and stories by others. What we consider today as the principal ideas of Sufism were in fact formulated in the second phase within the Iranian Sufi trend. The first problem that was bound to place Iranian sufism on a confrontational course with the official religion was the question of the relationship of the self to the divine.

In a way, the execution of Hallaj in Baghdad in the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century (10<sup>th</sup> AD) had a profound effect on the future development of Iranian Sufism. Hallaj's "crime" was to have found the divine within himself. To the religious authorities, this meant the end of theocracy and the beginnings of the rule of man-god. This is also a period in which, on the one hand, the re-emergence of Iranian culture is beginning to take shape, and on the other hand, religious doubts and constant questioning of the religious edicts of the Islamic caliphate were spreading wide amongst the urban population in Iran. This period has been called the age of "rebellious" Sufism. Iranian Sufism becomes in fact an expression of the spiritual struggle of the urban Iranian layers against dogmatic religious beliefs and edicts.

Naturally, a return to the pre-Islamic Iranian mystic idea of "man-god" played a key role here. The common feature of most Sufi schools of the time is indeed this way of confronting the theocracy of the Islamic Caliphates. The first ideological division within the Islamic Iran becomes the division between those who believed only the selected few can get close to the divine and those who saw the divine everywhere. Thus, Iranian Sufism rejected the idea that reaching the divine is the privilege of the few. Many of them considered religious practice and carrying out duties like prayers and fasting, to be in fact a hindrance in the endeavor to reach the divine. Establishing a direct relationship with the divine which was a characteristic of ancient Iranian mystical thoughts was once again revived within Islamic Sufism.

The idea that the self and the divine are a unified whole, and in essence the same thing, is the most common thread that runs through most Sufi schools of this period. As Saeb Tabrizi says: "connected are the waves". The same view persists for ages in Iranian mysticism.

Few centuries later we read in Divan Shams:

You pilgrims to Hajj, where are you, where are you,  
The beloved is here, where are you, where are you,  
Your beloved is your wall to wall neighbor,

Thus Iranian Sufism, in opposition to racial and social privileges of the time abandons religious privileges too and brings the king and the pauper, the Moslem and the heretic under the same roof (“khaneghah”) in front of the Sufi sage. The Sufi literature of the time is full of condemnation against possessors of wealth and power and ridicule of the false asceticism and devotion of those clerics which legitimize the corruption of the powerful. As in the Manichaean movement, reaching higher stages of divine spirituality was only dependent on devotion and spiritual and moral attainment. Any one could reach the highest levels by going through the initiation stages. These stages differed in different Sufi sects but were mostly either 7, like the Mithraist 7 stages to the eternal light, or 4, as in the 4 categories of Manichean followers which were called: master, apprentice, observer, chosen. The emergence of individual khaneghahs belongs to this period.

One of the specifically Iranian features here is this concept of khaneghah which has not been seen as extensively amongst other nations. Here again the Iranians have gone back to their history and remembered Mani. Manichaeans called their religious centers khanegah (home base) and in any city where they had some followers they would build one of these khanegahs. These were centers for religious practice, meetings of the faithful, devotional studies and communal prayers. Or the concept of “brotherhood” and “self-sacrifice” is very special to Iranian Sufism. Most Sufi leaders have always preached the importance of “brotherhood”. This is again an ancient concept. These attitudes for opposing oppression and helping others developed during the Mazdaki movement in opposition to the privileged cast system developed under Sassanids. It is noticeable how Abu Moslem in his fights against the Umayyad Caliphate can revive this tradition with ease and speed after more than a 100 years of Islam in khorasan.

Samaa is also another peculiarly Iranian feature of Sufism. Although today it is mostly linked to the Molavi (Rumi) School in Konya, Samaa is an ancient subject in Iranian Sufism. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century (10<sup>th</sup> AD) onwards there are repeated references in Islamic books on the question of its legality under Islam. These constant references themselves show that such practices were common amongst Iranian Sufis. There are a number of treaties written by leading Sufis on why, how and under what circumstances is Samaa allowed under Islam. After the 5<sup>th</sup> century (12<sup>th</sup> AD), the reasoning behind its acceptance was so well established that opposition to it was considered a sign of sectarian dogmatism and religious superficiality.

Another aspect of Iranian mysticism is its emphasis on love as the only means for reaching the divine. It is only love that is not following self-interest or pragmatic gains and really leads to the true divine. Iranian mysticism becomes dependent on love not only to explain creation itself but also as a means of return back to it. Hafez says: “love appeared and the whole world was set on fire”! To the “pure” and “beautiful” contemplative thinking preached by Mani as necessary for reaching the eternal light, Iranian mysticism of the Islamic era adds “love”. This was not common

amongst the Sufis in either Baghdad or Cairo and was specific to the Iranian school. Hallaj was probably the first Iranian Sufi to propose love as a means of communion with the divine.

The next stage of Iranian Sufism has been called the age of hidden (secretive) Sufism. This is the age when it was said “the red tongue will get the green head hanged”! Iran enters a long dark age in which hiding one’s views would become a matter of life or death. It coincides with the period when Iran, after the breakup of the Islamic empire, was suffering under different warlords in different regions and was constantly under attack by migrating Turkic tribes from central Asia. The characteristic features of Sufism in this period are avoidance of current issues, maintaining religious appearances, paying lip service to the official edicts and in general hiding what they actually believed in.

But this is at the same time the period of a Farsi revival in Iran and the rise of a new vibrant movement of Persian poetry. Many leading figures of Sufism turn to the Persian language after the 5<sup>th</sup> century (12<sup>th</sup> AD). During a period of about two hundred years, we witness a great revolution in Persian poetry both in form and content, most of which we owe to Khorasan’s Sufism. Persian poetry provides the Iranian mystics not only with a versatile tool for expressing their complex, multi-layered, emotive and esoteric views but also a means for hiding those views in a language of hidden meanings and symbolism. On the other hand turning to poetry helped emphasize love even more as the only ideal relationship between the self and the divine. The 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> (12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> AD) centuries Iranian Sufi literature is full of pamphlets and treaties on love and the psychology of love. Creation of such artistic works reaches such levels of perfection that there are tens of collected works by poets like Attar, Shams, Molavi, Hafez... the likes of none of which has never been seen in world literature.

During the Safavid era and later, Sufism and mysticism in Iran takes a more complex and troubled character. Although the Safavids themselves were originally a Sufi sect, because of their rule, Sufism in Iran entered a period of decline. Firstly, the corruption of political power led to a moral degeneration of the Sufis in power. Secondly, there appeared suddenly a whole layer of swindlers in Sufi cloths and finally the Sufi’s in power were extremely dogmatic and themselves started persecuting other currents. Many Iranian Sufis emigrated abroad in this period. Sufi literature of the period is full of attempts at proving the Islamic nature of Sufism.

Mola Sadra, the great Islamic philosopher of the Safavid era, wrote a number of treaties in defence of Sufism and redefined faith from a Sufi standpoint which has influenced Sufi thought ever since. He was one of those who tried to re-define the concept of unity of existence in a new “Islamic” way. The old Iranian notion that the divine is in all of us is in this new philosophy turned on its head by saying only the divine exists. This concept which was acceptable to the Moslem theologians of the

time provided some cover for certain Sufi sects to continue. However, despite this acceptance, many of the Shiite clerics used the forces of the state to start a vociferous campaign against Sufism which continues to the present. From the Safavids onward, we have witnessed a period of constant conflict between the Shiite hierarchy and Sufism.

