

**THE SUFI JOURNEY TOWARDS NONDUAL SELF-REALIZATION**

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## **Abstract**

Sufism is a living mystical tradition with tools and a theoretical framework geared to facilitate the realization of one's full potential. This thesis examines the nature of such a realization, which culminates in an experience of nondual Self-realization.

Transpersonal psychology provided the conceptual framework for this study, as it attempts to document the role that altered states of consciousness play in facilitating health and wellbeing. This research also drew heavily from the methodology of phenomenological hermeneutics and transpersonal phenomenology, which supported the investigation into the lived experience of five Sufi practitioners. The guiding research question of this exploratory inquiry asks, *What has been the lived experience of Sufi practitioners on their journey towards nondual Self-realization?* The research findings consist of eight themes that emerged during the analysis of the textual data. The implications of these findings impact the health and counseling fields, as well as the environmental crisis.

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## **Chapter I - The Sufi Journey towards Nondual Self-realization**

### **Introduction**

The opening chapter of this thesis serves as an introduction to the research topic, namely, the Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization. I begin this introduction by briefly sharing the personal journey that has brought me to this research. My reflections help to disclose my relationship to the topic and my own personal situatedness within this study as an implicated researcher. I will then offer a discussion of how research into the Sufi journey fits into the greater context of the health field today, outlining its relevance and significance. Finally, the purpose of this study will be discussed and an overview of the thesis will be presented.

### **Arriving at the Research Topic**

We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are.

Adin Steinsaltz, *The Essential Talmud*

The philosophical orientation of the methodology in this study highlights the importance of unveiling the researcher's personal relationship to the topic. In particular, the hermeneutic tradition emphasizes the interpretive lens through which we perceive the world, and with which we encounter any form of inquiry. As the principal researcher of this study, I did not approach this work objectively or as a detached *value-free* observer -- rather as a "self, a bearer of intentionality and meaning" (Wilber, 2000, p. 161), I approached this work, interpreted this work and saw this work through my own personal filters. I have emerged out of a certain context within the world and have experienced, as a consequence, a particular life trajectory. These factors have shaped my present "field of

understanding," or what Hans-Georg Gadamer would refer to as my "horizon" (1987). This means that I hold values and assumptions about the world that are so deeply a part of who I am that I cannot possibly arrive at a conscious awareness of them all. For this reason it is important that I disclose my relationship to the Sufi path and provide some background about my personal quest for Self-realization.

Socrates famously declared that an "unexamined life is not worth living" and it is these immortal words that have guided my own life's path. To the extent that my life has been focused on gaining self-knowledge, I have experienced it as a response to the Delphic oracle, "know thyself." From a young age I became interested in the question of religious pluralism. How would I reconcile the diversity of faith, and ultimately come to know Truth? I soon realized that the answer to this query would only come intuitively through personal insight in which I would have to turn inward in order to discover this great transcendent mystery. Apart from metaphysical inquiry, I was deeply concerned, on an immediate practical level, about the wellbeing of others and desired to alleviate their suffering. I eventually came to understand that both levels of concern, the metaphysical and the practical, could find their resolve through a personal journey towards Self-realization. Healing starts with each individual and the journey towards Self-realization, I have felt, is the center point for creating meaning and purpose in one's life, and from which all goodness emanates.

### ***Healing through Self-realization***

Self-realization allows one to experience the fullness of their Being, to realize their human potential, and open to a space of boundlessness in which all conflicts, confusion and concern find their place of rest and clarity. Abiding in this nondual space

allows one to effortlessly move through one's life with a serene inwardness, and surrender to all things that may come to pass. It does not suggest pacifism, but evokes instead the understanding that life's events, whether perceived as "positive" or "negative", are all means for some greater end and are opportunities for change and self-transformation.

After many years of exploring different religious traditions and spiritual systems, experimenting with different practices and forms of meditation, living in ashrams and temples abroad and locally, and acquiring knowledge from books and teachers, I eventually found myself exploring Sufism. I found the practices and overall lifestyle encouraged by this mystical tradition to be tremendously healing. Through Sufism I consciously understood my personal journey towards Self-realization to be a quest for the Absolute. There is a Sufi saying that "he who knows himself, knows his Lord", which aptly describes the epic romance that has taken center stage in my own life, namely a desire for union with the Beloved. The impact of this journey has left a palpable effect on all aspects of my being, from the physical to the emotional and spiritual. It is for this reason that I became interested in studying Sufism with direct consideration of its health benefits.

### **Situating the Sufi Journey within a Health Context**

In recent years there has been a growing interest in holistic approaches to health. Eisenberg et al. (1998) report that the general public is increasingly seeking out complementary and alternative medical care (p. 1689). Many individuals are choosing alternative forms of healing, rooted in spiritual or indigenous wisdom, to complement or substitute conventional allopathic treatments. The appeal of alternative healing methods

seems to be in their conceptualization of the human being. As Groves (2009) writes, alternative models of healing consider the “wholeness of the person” (p.5). This means that the human being is considered to be multi-dimensional in which “the elements of mind, body, spirit, emotions, and environment are interrelated” (Hemphill-Pearson & Hunter, 1997, p. 35). Clearly, complimentary and alternative healing methods embrace a holistic paradigm.

### ***Holism in the Health Field***

The holistic approach to healing found within complimentary and alternative care considers the human being as a whole system of interconnected parts that is multi-dimensional and dynamic. In comparison, allopathic medicine understands ill health to be rooted in the physiology of the human being, and is thus premised on a certain reductionist and grossly materialistic approach (one which does not seriously take into consideration a spiritual or transcendent element). It dissects the body and treats each symptom as a seemingly “isolated” occurrence, and in this way, views it as a collection of compartmentalized phenomena. On the other hand, alternative healing paradigms consider the totality of the human being by integrating the human spiritual dimension.

It is important here to provide a definition of spirituality, as it is central to this discussion. Drawing on the work of Mauk & Schmidt (2004) spirituality can be defined as “the core of a person’s being involving one’s relationship with God or a higher power” (p. 146). Within alternative healing paradigms there is often a direct link that is made between troubled spiritual states and the manifestation of psychological or physical symptoms. For example, in the case of homeopathic medicine the subtle emotional and spiritual ailments are the focus of treatment as they are thought to be foundational of ill

health. Likewise, within the field of psychology there is a rising interest towards holistic psychology that is most concretely manifested in transpersonal psychology.

### *A Holistic Psychology*

Transpersonal psychology assumes that optimal wellbeing is found in spiritual or *transpersonal* levels of realization. The approach to healing within transpersonal psychology is not centered on eliminating symptoms in the patient in order to ‘normalize’ them, as in most mainstream psychoanalytic and behavioral streams. For example, if a patient is suffering from symptoms of depression the focus of treatment will not be the depression, which is seen merely as a symptom of a larger problem. Rather, the therapist would work with the patient to facilitate self-awareness in order that they may become conscious of the source of the depression, and the underlying concerns and/or imbalances. In transpersonal psychology the human being is viewed as an unfolding reality, and correspondingly, healing is looked upon as a dynamic process, one that is ongoing and long term. Curing or alleviating symptoms such as depression may be the by-product of transpersonal counseling, but is certainly not the focus.

The goal of transpersonal counseling is to facilitate the client’s transformational journey towards ultimate healing. The therapist supports the client in realizing a deeper understanding of who they are beyond the outer shell of their personality. By exploring his or her personal journey story the client is able to reflect on the key turning points in their life that have shaped their current understanding of who they are.

Transpersonal psychology holds that spiritual or transcendent experiences of consciousness facilitate optimal health and the realization of human potentials. It looks to the world’s spiritual traditions for tools and a healthy framework to understand this

process, making spirituality the cornerstone of this holistic psychology (Delany, 2005). According to Delany (2005), “mounting evidence of the relationship between spirituality and positive health outcomes has brought spirituality to the borders of mainstream health care and indicates its reunion with science” (p. 146). It is for the reason that I see a connection between, what seems to be a growing interest in alternative and holistic health paradigms, and the opportunity to work on a research project that explores the intersections between spirituality and healing.

### **Purpose**

The purpose of this research is to explore the lived experience of Sufi practitioners’ in their journey towards nondual Self-realization. Its aim is to shed light on the dynamic unfolding of the transformational journey offered through Sufism. In addition, it is to capture the mythic-mystical journeys of the Sufi practitioners and offer some insight and understanding of the healing potential offered through this spiritual tradition.

### **Research Question(s)**

The research question central to this inquiry is, *What has been the lived experience of Sufi practitioners on their journey towards nondual Self-realization?* A secondary, but related question is, *What are the transformational experiences, of a nondual nature, that Sufi practitioners have experienced in their journey?* These two questions drove the inquiry of this work, and were posed in order to elicit explanations of peak, mystical and nondual experiences. The open-ended and exploratory nature of these questions helped render an understanding of the healing potential of nonordinary consciousness experienced through Sufism.

## **Significance**

Currently, there is very little research carried out on Sufism with direct consideration of the potential psychological, developmental and healing benefits of this particular spiritual path. Therefore, the significance of this study lies in its scholarly contribution to the field of health sciences. It is the intent of the researcher to expand on and add to the scientific research on Sufism and healing, as well as to create a new opening for future research in this area.

A second point of significance is to reveal healing techniques within Sufism that might, later on, be integrated into extant psychotherapeutic models and counseling practices. As the interest in holistic paradigms remains salient, this study finds its significance and relevance in the greater conversation ongoing within the health field today.

## **Overview of the Thesis**

This thesis is organized into the following five chapters:

Chapter one provides an introduction to the phenomenon of this study, namely, the Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization. In this opening chapter the principal researchers' personal situatedness and connection to the research topic has been disclosed. The relevance of this study within the context of the health field, particularly with consideration of the movement towards holistic health paradigms, has been considered. Finally, the purpose, significance and organization of the thesis is presented.

In the second chapter a review of the literature, as it pertains to the central concepts in this study is provided, as well, key terms are defined. This chapter also reviews the early foundational works of Abraham Maslow in his investigation into human

development and the realization of human potential. His discussion of peak-experiences and self-transcendence are necessary points of examination. The theoretical grounding provided by perennial philosophy is presented, as it has greatly informed the field of transpersonal psychology. In addition, this chapter outlines the developmental spectrum of human consciousness conceived within transpersonal psychology and the seven stages of psycho-spiritual development conceptualized within the Sufi tradition.

The third chapter outlines the philosophical orientation provided by the qualitative methodologies of this study, namely phenomenological hermeneutics and transpersonal phenomenology. Both of these methodologies hold very specific ontological and epistemological implications that are discussed in this chapter. In addition, dramaturgical interviewing was applied to elicit narrative descriptions of the Sufi practitioners' personal journeys and accounts of nondual and transcendent states of consciousness. Finally, recruitment strategies, inclusion criteria, scientific rigor, data management and analysis, and the research limitations and strengths of this study are outlined.

Chapter four, which is essentially the heart of the thesis, outlines the lived experience of the five Sufi practitioners in this study. In this chapter the research findings are presented as eight themes that follow the mythic-mystical quest of the Sufi practitioners. The eight themes, which have emerged from their collective stories, form the grand narrative of the Sufi journey.

In the concluding chapter, chapter five, a review of the research findings is presented. The strengths and limitations of this work are reconsidered and ideas for future research are also shared. Implications of this work, with direct consideration for the



health field, the environmental crisis and counseling are presented. In the very last section of this chapter the researcher offers her final reflections of the research process, as she revisits her implicated role within this study.

### **Chapter Summary**

In this chapter the reader was introduced to the researcher's personal connection to the research topic, and the path that led her to study the intersection of Sufism and healing. The current interest in holistic paradigms within the health field was presented, which situated the Sufi journey within a health context. Finally the purpose and significance of this research project as well as an overview of the thesis were outlined.

## **Chapter II - A Review of the Literature**

### **Introduction**

This chapter offers a review of the literature related to the central concepts in this study. It opens with a presentation of two very different conceptualizations on the nature of the human psyche and proceeds with definitions of key terms, with particular consideration of the term nondual Self-realization. It includes a review of the early foundational works of transpersonal psychology based on Abraham Maslow's inquiry into the realization of human potential, notably his investigation into peak-experiences and self-transcendence. An outline of the theoretical grounding of perennial philosophy is included as it has greatly informed the field of transpersonal psychology, as well, the implicit ontological and epistemological assumptions of transpersonal psychology, including its central model of developed are discussed. Finally, traditional and contemporary literature pertaining to Sufi psychology and the seven stages of psycho-spiritual development conceptualized within this tradition are presented.

### **Two Conceptualizations of the Psyche**

In its essence psychology refers to the study of the human self or *psyche*. Within the discipline of psychology we find two distinct approaches to the study of the self. This distinction, I would argue, rests on two different conceptualizations on the nature of the human psyche. For most of Western psychology the psyche refers to the workings of consciousness created by brain matter. This exclusively refers to the study of mind as it engages with reality at a material level. The popular definition of psyche within Western psychology brought about a scientific study of the self related to personality, motivation, learning and causes of behavior, among other qualities that the

material self exhibits (Wilber, 1999b). These dimensions of the self that I would characterize as being related to material and *ego*<sup>1</sup> consciousness have generated dozens of theories within the literature of psychology, respectively.

The second understanding of psyche within contemporary psychology relates to the study of the self as it engages with a non-material, or metaphysical reality. This perspective defines the psyche as spirit or soul. It recognizes a spiritual dimension of the human being and addresses the spiritual needs of the individual. It is interested in nonordinary experiences of consciousness that rely on “the direct phenomenological intuition of the Self beyond the ego” (Louchakova, 2007, p. 81). The Self in this context is often spoken of as the true Self or the transpersonal Self, an entity that is not bound by the same parameters as the material self.

In psychology today there is an emerging interest in the study of consciousness that goes beyond the more conventional understanding of the psyche. This interest is most evident in the field of transpersonal psychology, as its chief aim is in documenting transcendent or spiritual states of consciousness experienced beyond the ego (Cotright, 1997; Fukuyama & Sevig, 1999; Frager, 1999, 2007; Maslow, 1964, 1968; Pryor, 2000; Wilber, 2000). This contemporary psychology deems spirituality as an essential aspect of human experience. It holds that the spiritual dimension should be developed and integrated in order for the human being to realize the highest reaches of their potential. Accordingly, it recognizes that one should attempt to transcend the limitations of personal consciousness and apprehend the totality of one’s being in *transpersonal* states.

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<sup>1</sup> The ego is a psychological construct that refers to the sense of personal identity. It consists of a constellation of identifications one holds about his or her location in the world.

Therefore, it understands ultimate realization to be established through self-transcendence.

Jonathan Bricklin (2003) writes that William James, who is the “father of American Psychology” alluded to self-transcendence when he spoke of “consciousness” and “sciousness.” He distinguished between consciousness as “consciousness-with-self” versus “sciousness” or “consciousness-without-self.” The idea of “consciousness-without-self” can be understood to engender the very idea of the *transpersonal* Self, or the Self beyond the ego. Furthermore Bricklin (2003) understands James’s work as maintaining that prime reality “is not revealed through the subject-object divide, but in the ‘sciousness’ of nondual experience” (p. 85). The reality proposed by James, of “consciousness-without-self” or self-transcendence, is the height of nondual being conceptualized within transpersonal psychology and the central phenomenon explored in this study.

As noted earlier, there are two distinct approaches to the study of the psyche within psychology, one that deals more exclusively with ego consciousness, and an alternative holistic stream, which understands consciousness as having a trans-egoic reality. These two perspectives on the psyche are not incongruous halves, but require a developmental model that encompasses and integrates both realities. Since many secular psychologies are not able to provide responses to the most perennial and existential questions of human concern to the *depth* of transpersonal psychology, this kind of spiritual psychology is warranted.

Spirituality has not only been an element of human experience since antiquity, but perhaps its most central element. Many consider spirituality or the “spiritual impulse” to

be responsible for allowing humans to reach the greatest heights of Self-realization, of fulfillment, wholeness and balance (Frager, 1999, 20007; Louchakova, 2007; Helmski, 1992; Maslow, 1964,1968; Pryor 2000; Shah, 1978; Wilber, 2000). For thousands of years religion, and its mystical counterpart, has offered comprehensive and holistic explanations of the psyche. They have provided methods of practice and ritual to develop and integrate both material and spiritual dimensions of human experience, and thereby honour the richness and complexity of life. For this reason the contemporary field of transpersonal psychology aims at uncovering the wisdom of these traditions, the depth of their understanding of human nature, and the psycho-spiritual models of self-development they provide. Amineh Amelia Pryor (2000) writes to this point in the following passage,

Every religious and mystical tradition includes an implicit psychology, a model of human nature that describes our spiritual potentials. A complete spiritual psychology outlines the gamut of human virtues and vices, and depicts the path of spiritual growth... every spiritual tradition discusses this process of inner growth and development. (p. 1)

The interest in facilitating the fullest reaches of human potential have led transpersonal psychologists to look to ancient wisdom traditions for models of Self-realization. Within the literature of transpersonal psychology there have been significant studies that incorporate the understanding of psycho-spiritual development from Buddhist and yogic traditions, yet Sufi psychology has not been thoroughly explored. This makes the current study of nondual Self-realization, as it is understood and experienced within Sufism, a timely and relevant undertaking.

## **Introducing Key Concepts**

The key concepts in this study are Sufism and nondual Self-realization. The term *nondual Self-realization* is simply an alternate way of describing the traditional understanding of Divine union; that of union with God and *in* God. The concept of Self-realization has evolved within the field of psychology from its earliest conceptualizations within the psychoanalytic streams, which considered ultimate realization to be the healthy integration of mind and body aspects, constituting the mature and healthy ego (Vaughan, 1985). Under the work of Abraham Maslow, in his cutting edge research in the late 60's and 70's, its definition developed to include transcendent states of realization. This was most evident in Maslow's study of peak-experiences, which were *transcendent* and *nondual* in nature. The conceptualization of Self-realization then, led by Maslow, developed within transpersonal psychology to include the healthy integration of body, mind and spiritual dimensions of human experience.

There are two models of development presented in this review. The first is Ken Wilber's "spectrum of development" (1986). Ken Wilber, who is a key theorist of transpersonal psychology, outlines the transformation of consciousness through a spectrum of ten stages. These stages integrate conventional and contemplative perspectives on development and rely heavily on the wisdom of psycho-spiritual models particular to the Buddhist and Hindu traditions. Wilber's "spectrum of development" is referenced widely within the field of transpersonal psychology. Therefore, its importance in this research cannot be overstated.

The second developmental model comes from the Sufi tradition. The Sufi model conceptualizes Self-realization through seven stages, or gradations of awakening. The seven levels of the psyche, called *nafs* in Arabic, is outlined by drawing on Robert

Fragar's (1999) work *Heart, Self, & Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony*.

Let us turn now to examine the field of transpersonal psychology, and in particular, the historical and contextual ground of its development. I start by uncovering the origins of transpersonal psychology by turning to the works of Abraham Maslow and his description of "peak-experiences" and self-actualized persons.

### **Abraham Maslow's Work**

In his groundbreaking work *Religion, Values and Peak-experiences* Maslow challenges the "narrow science" of his time, and the dichotomization of science and religion. He criticizes science for pursuing a value-free reductionism that ignores the sacredness of the individual, and thus, the fullness of human experience (1964). His critique of religion (presumably modern Christianity) is that it has become too "anti-scientific" and "anti-intelligent" and should allow for studies that explore the intersections of religion with science. He proposes that both domains have been too narrowly conceived and should broaden their worldviews. Maslow argues that through the field of psychology the misleading dichotomy of science and religion can be overcome.

#### ***Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs***

Maslow's (1964) *Hierarchy of Needs* is his most popular contribution to the field of psychology. In his model Maslow presents a hierarchy of human needs generated through his study of psychologically healthy individuals (1964). From his findings he developed a theory of growth and development, which he outlines in five stages. This developmental spectrum culminates in self-actualization once all five needs are met.

Maslow identified key requirements for the healthy psychological growth of individuals. He acknowledges that a healthy integration of a variety of human dimensions and experiences are required to reach self-actualization, including physical, emotional, intellectual, and even creative needs. Maslow succinctly outlined his theory when he wrote:

... healthy people have sufficiently gratified their basic needs for safety, belongingness, love, respect and self-esteem so that they are motivated primarily by trends to self-actualization (defined as ongoing actualization of potentials, capacities and talents...as a fuller knowledge of, and acceptance of, the person's own intrinsic nature, as an unceasing trend toward unity, integration or synergy within the person). (1968, p. 23)

For Maslow self-actualization, or the fifth need in his model, became the height of psychological healing and wholeness. Maslow describes self-actualization as *being* rather than becoming. This suggests abiding in one's essence, an absolute state from which the individual operates (1968). Maslow makes a distinction between two kinds of people: those who are motivated by an interest for self-development and transformation, and who are driven by "growth-needs", and those who are motivated by "basic-needs" and may not be as inclined to reach their highest potential of actualization. He claims that self-actualized people are "those who have come to a high level of maturation, health and self-fulfillment..." (1968, p. 71). In a 1968 phenomenological hermeneutic study, Maslow concluded that only 1% of the adult population had reached the level of self-actualization (1968, p. 204).



### *Self-actualization*

The notion of self-actualization, as presented by Maslow, has particular relevance to this study. It is for the reason that within Maslow's writings one can see the beginnings of a conceptualization of the psyche that resembles a transpersonal understanding. From the outset Maslow appears to have conceptualized human development towards a purely healthy and integrated ego consciousness. However, his later studies point to deeper realities available to the human being informed by a spiritual understanding of self-transcendence. Maslow later added to his definition of "self-actualization" to encompass the possibilities of self-transcendence, whereby individuals enter a "trans-egoic" reality of consciousness, which he called "peak-experiences." For example, Maslow refers to a "superior perception of reality" and characterizes this state of "superior perception" as an increased sense of interconnectedness with others, acceptance of self and others, "detachment" and a greater sense of appreciation (1968). These qualities run parallel to the descriptions of transpersonal realization found within Ken Wilber's "spectrum of development" and those within Sufism.

Maslow argues that by "turning inward in a meditative way" one can facilitate the process of self-actualization (1968, p. 38). He briefly relates this meditative engagement to the contemplative practices found in Buddhist and Taoist traditions. He describes this inward turning as the subject moving "closer to the core of his Being" (1968, p. 97). This suggests that Maslow understood the self-actualization process to be one wherein the individual moves beyond the superficial identifications of ego consciousness, constituting a journey into their inner depths and unveiling of their essential nature. The contemplative component of self-actualization, developed here by Maslow, is analogous to the contemplative prescriptions found in Sufism. In Sufism, the inward-dwelling

practices of prayer, chanting, and silent contemplation are essential for growth. One can discern that Maslow is approaching a definition of self-actualization that is closely related to the concept of Self-realization.

Maslow characterizes self-actualized persons as living in “an inner psychic world that may be called Heaven” (1968, p. 214). He also highlights that they embody many characteristics and ideals urged by religion. For example, “the transcendence of self... wisdom, honesty, and naturalness, the transcendence of selfish and personal motivations, the giving up of “lower” desires in favor of the “higher” ones, increased friendliness and kindness... tranquility, serenity peace...(1968 p. 158). Maslow thus opened the way to explore the intersections between religion and psychology that have become the central foci of research within the field of transpersonal psychology.

### ***Peak-experiences and Nondual States***

Maslow claims that an essential component for growth towards self-actualization is the occurrence of peak-experiences. He coined the term “peak-experience” to mean a profound moment of realization and insight that is at once *atemporal* and *aspatial*. He says that the peak-experience can be of two kinds: one that is more ecstatic in nature, full of rapture, “wild”, “yelling out loud” “jumping up and down” and one that is of a more sober nature characterized by stillness, peace and relaxation (1968). In both instances these experiences bring much value to the life of the individual experiencing them. In a moment of peak-experience self-criticism and self-conscious attitudes are said to dissolve. An intense feeling of love and acceptance for oneself and for others, as well as a deep sense of connectedness to others emerges. This is characterized by a feeling of unity or oneness. Maslow writes,

In some reports, particularly of the mystic experience or the religious experience or philosophical experience, the whole of the world is seen as unity, as a single rich live entity. In other of the peak-experiences... one small part of the world is perceived as if it were for the moment all of the world. (1968, p. 88)

In the peak-experience reality is perceived in its oneness. In it “many dichotomies, polarities and conflicts are fused, transcended or resolved” (1968, p. 91). Maslow points out that this *nondual* state provides healing, and in fact is a moment of health. He writes, “one aspect of health is integration” and in the peak-experience “the splits dissolve” (1968, p. 210). In the peak-experience dissociative states are transcended momentarily, offering psychological repair and indicating “momentary heaths” (1968, p. 210). In these states the individual experiences “less fighting against himself, [is] more at peace with himself, less split between an experiencing-self and an observing-self, more one-pointed....” (1968, p. 104). In its definition the peak-experience can be recognized as a *nondual* experience, as it transcends the impressions of duality created by the ego, between self and other or subject and object. In peak moments the limitations and defilements of the ego are absolved, and therein is a freedom and an infinite space. Therefore, Maslow’s study of peak-experiences is a foundational inquiry into nondual experiences of consciousness.

Maslow recognized the transformational qualities of peak-experiences as facilitating healthy growth and development. He describes peak-experiences as an opportunity for the individual to temporarily take on the level of the self-actualized individual (1968). There is a clear relationship between the peak-experience and self-actualization. Self-actualization is not the peak-experience, however the peak-experience

does reflect, if only temporarily, the self-actualized individual. Maslow notes that the self-actualized individual is prone to have peak-experiences more often than a non-actualized individual, and that they are more profound in nature (1968).

### ***Farther Reaches of Human Nature***

In later works by Maslow, notably *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature* (1971), his discussion of peak-experiences seem completely colored by religious language. He characterizes these experiences as “sacred; sublime...spiritual, transcendent, eternal, infinite, holy, absolute; state of awe; of worship...” and refers to them as moments of “Unitive consciousness” (p. 127). For Maslow, peak-experiences are “states of fusion of temporal and eternal, of local and universal, of relative and absolute, of fact and value” as well as “states tending toward ultimate holism” (1971, p. 127). By examining Maslow’s writings it appears that he came to associate peak-experiences closely with religious experience. His writings point to the recognition of the role religious and spiritual practices have in facilitating the occurrences of peak-experiences, as well as the necessity of inquiry into this dimension of human experience. He states, “the human being needs a framework of values, a philosophy of life, a religion or a religion-surrogate to live by and understand by, in about the same sense that he needs sunlight, calcium or love” (p. 206). Maslow appears adamant about the value and necessity of religious and spiritual life, its transformative effect on the human being, and facilitation towards self-actualization. He drives home his point in the following statement, “without the transcendent and the transpersonal, we get sick, violent and nihilistic, or else hopeless and apathetic” (1968, p. 206).

The examination of Abraham Maslow's writings, in relation to his theory of self-actualization and his concept of peak-experiences, allows us to move into the domain of transpersonal psychology with a point of reference to engage the central phenomenon of this study. Before entering into a discussion of transpersonal psychology and Wilber's "spectrum of development", let us turn to the philosophy of *perennialism*, as it is this branch of philosophy that provides the philosophical underpinnings for transpersonal psychology.

### **Perennial Philosophy**

Transpersonal psychology is heavily influenced by the wisdom of perennial philosophy. In fact, Robert Frager, who is a pioneer in the field and founder of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, considers that "transpersonal psychology is largely a return to the perennial philosophy identified by Aldous Huxley" (2007, p. 2). Since perennial philosophy and transpersonal psychology are so closely tied, it is crucial to present the central themes of *perennialism* before moving to a formal discussion of transpersonal psychology.

The perennial philosophy seeks to explain the fundamental reality of the human being, the purpose of religion and the question of religious diversity. According to the perennial philosophy, the underlying truths of all religions are at their core fundamentally the same. This philosophy is premised on the idea that the world's great religions share an inner substance that is embodied most concretely in their mystical traditions. The symbols and imagery of the religions differ, but the core principles are identical. According to perennial philosophy all religions are valid pathways to the Divine and were in turn providentially "revealed" at different moments in history. Since the

pathways only converge at the summit, that is to say, in peak mystical experiences, the perennial philosophers maintain that the unity of religion is a “transcendent unity”, in which the inner teachings of religion communicate one essential Truth.

The most notable representatives of the perennial philosophy in contemporary scholarship are important figures such as Aldous Huxley, Frithjof Schuon, Huston Smith, Ananda Comaraswamy, Martin Lings, Seyyed Hossein Nasr and Rene Guenon. It was through Aldous Huxley’s (1945) *The Perennial Philosophy* that this school of thought was first introduced to a mainstream audience. According to the aforementioned thinkers the perennial philosophy is the recurring wisdom of the human race, a wisdom that is characterized by a quest to understand the origins and nature of the human self and of Reality. The mysticisms of the world’s religions, which are inherently perennial in their perspective, maintain the belief that all people have the potential to realize their true essential nature. It understands that every individual can make the Return to their origin through a path laid out by any of the world’s great religions, and thereby can reach the heights of Self-realization.

Nondual self-realization, or put differently, union with God, is the focus and pinnacle of self-realization in mysticism. Nondual self-realization is the realization that the Absolute is located at the core of one’s being, and was never separate from it. Therefore, the human being must work through the layers of the lesser selves, and the false attachments to ego consciousness in order to arrive at the real Self in transcendent levels.

### *The Necessity of Self-transcendence*

The perennial philosophers argue that if finite existence were satisfying for the human being, he or she would not remain dissatisfied with the external material forms of sensory existence. In his essay, “Sufism and the Perennity of the Mystical Quest”, a prominent contemporary perennialist and Sufi philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr eloquently and articulately explicates this very fact when he writes:

...the permanent nature of man’s quest after the Divine thus lies in the very fibers of human existence... if man were to be only a creature of the sensory world, bound to passionate impulses and imprisoned by his natural and physical inclinations,...[he or she] would not remain dissatisfied with the finite and would not continue to seek, albeit often blindly, the Infinite Reality which can deliver him from the bonds of the finite and the limited. He would be content as an earthly creature. Transcendence would have no meaning for him. He would be limited like other earthly creatures and also like them he would remain unaware of the fact that he is limited and bound in space and time. But precisely because both of these elements, the theomorphic nature and the terrestrial crust which covers and hides this spiritual core, are parts of human nature, man lives in this world and is yet bound by his own nature to transcend it. (1991, p. 26-27)

According to Nasr, the finite self does not represent the entirety of human reality, nor one’s highest realizable potential. To be solely identified with the external, material reality of the self, means, from the perspective of perennial philosophy, that the human being is in fact dispersed and fragmented. This suggests that, to the extent that she has not realized the true Self, she is incomplete.

The perennial philosophers conclude that it is in the connection with the Divine

that humanity finds wholeness and sustained wellbeing. They insist that the quest for the Absolute has been a recurring concern for humanity since antiquity. Nasr argues that this quest is characteristic of every major world religion and to deny this experience is to deprive the human being of its essence, since this essence is its fundamental Reality. The process of realizing one's essential nature requires a gradual process of *interiorization*. On the contrary, by *exteriorizing* oneself, the human being does not know their true nature and neglects the very substance of their being.

The difficulty of self-transcendence, for the non-realized human being living in the world of forms and consumed by the fixation of the ego, is in seeing the hidden pathway available for transcendence. Frithjof Schuon articulates this best when he writes: “The paradox of the human condition is that nothing is so contrary to us as the requirement to transcend ourselves, and nothing so fundamentally ourselves as the essence of this requirement, the fruit of transcending” (1992, p. 2). Nasr (1991) writes that in modern times the need to “conquer space”, is “due to an unconscious urge or ‘mystique’ to transcend earthly finitude—but in a physical manner which is the only manner modern men believe to be possible...” (p. 31). The realization of spiritual consciousness, in self-transcendence, is the goal of mysticism. To be in Union and connection with Divine reality, with the Beloved, Nasr (1991) articulates, is the “goal of all mystical romances” (p. 32).

### ***The Perennial Need for Self-realization***

Self-realization requires transcending the limitations of ego consciousness. It necessitates going beyond ego-centric identifications that form the “personality” and create the illusion of a separate self-existence. In the opinion of perennial philosophy, the



Divine Self emerges once the personal self falls away. On the waves of no-self, the human being perceives beyond the limitations of the ego and enters into a place of expansion, of Supreme Consciousness, “the mind of God” if you will. Transpersonal psychology is primarily concerned with facilitating individuals towards this ultimate state of Selfhood, through abandoning less-complete conceptualizations of the self.

Transpersonal psychology is therefore a necessary stream within the field of psychology that addresses the most perennial concerns of the human being.

### **Transpersonal Psychology**

A person is neither a thing nor a process, but an opening or clearing through which the Absolute can manifest.

Ken Wilber, The Atman Project

Abraham Maslow’s study into peak-experiences and self-actualized individuals established transpersonal psychology as a distinct type of depth psychology premised on the study of human growth and development available at trans-egoic levels. Maslow’s work justified the benefit of further inquiry into transpersonal and transcendent states of being, which he recognized as an essential reality of the psyche and a requirement for Self-realization (1964). Maslow ignited what became known as the “fourth force” within psychology, transpersonal psychology, emerging during the 1960’s. He defined transpersonal psychology as ‘transpersonal, transhumant, centered in the cosmos rather than in human needs and interest’ (1964, p. iv). In this statement Maslow points to a shift from personal consciousness to nonordinary reality that is discovered by going beyond personal consciousness, and becoming rooted in the “cosmos.” The personal, ego-self should be transcended, in order that (as Wilber’s opening quote suggests) the Absolute can manifest.

### *Defining 'Transpersonal'*

The term *transpersonal* was introduced by Carl Jung with his usage of “transpersonal unconscious” as a synonymous term for the “collective unconscious” (Frager, 2007, p. 1). Transpersonal psychology grew out of humanistic and existential psychology. However, some trace its origins back further. Robert Frager (2007), the founder of the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology, understands the earliest ideas of transpersonal psychology to be nascent in the therapeutic streams of Freud and his successors before emerging distinctly in the works of Maslow.

The term transpersonal refers to “beyond the personal” (Fukayama & Sevig, 1999, p. 8), which picks up the very theme discussed in perennial philosophy as the need to transcend ego consciousness. To go beyond the personality, and the finite and limited awareness of the self, is central to the practices of mysticism. Wilber notes that it is the “dis-identification” with personality rather than the modification of personality that is underlined in this field (1979). Transpersonal psychology emphasizes working through the ego to eventually move beyond it, beyond personality and self-concepts. The unique perspective held by transpersonal psychology is that it “assumes that our essential nature is spiritual, consciousness is multi-dimensional, and humans have valid urges towards spiritual seeking, expressed as a search for wholeness, through deepening individual, social, and transcendent awareness” (Nixon, 2005, p. 58). Transpersonal psychology perceives the integration of the spiritual dimension as essential for the human being to become fully healthy and whole. It blends the “wisdom of the world’s spiritual traditions with the learning of modern psychology” (Cotright, 1997, p. 8).

The holistic perspective that transpersonal psychology holds is not widely shared within the wider discipline of psychology. Even though some consider the transpersonal

field as the future norm in psychology, as yet, it is not recognized by the mainstream (Frager, 1999). An obvious reason behind the resistance to transpersonal psychology is in its interest and focus in exploring the metaphysical nature of the psyche. The advent of narrow scientism, spurred on by the radical empiricism of the logical positivists, rejected all possibility of metaphysical truth. The scientific enterprise, espoused by logical positivism, developed systems of scientific inquiry that were entirely focused on empirical and sensory data alone. Positivism rejected metaphysical truth and the investigation into higher contemplative systems of inquiry (Rodgers, 2005, p. 90). Scientific methodology became a highly quantitative and analytic process. Knowledge became a process of deduction and consequently a reduction of the human experience to the basic sensory level of existence. The possibility of spiritual consciousness and transcendent experiences were thought to be invalid, as they were attributed to the experience of mere brain function. According to Ken Wilber (2000) the subtle reductionism of narrow science has created a “flatland” of valueless facts and information in which “meaning, depth, and Divinity” have been erased from human experience (p. 77).

Within the field of psychology there are some streams, notably the humanistic and existential streams that accept the subjective and phenomenological dimensions of human experience, and even acknowledge spiritual consciousness. However, they are still based on and limited to ego-centered realities and definitions. Wilber makes a distinction between two psychologies. This distinction is based on the very different conceptualization that each psychology has on spiritual experience. On one hand, there is transpersonal psychology “which is open to the spiritual, transcendental, or transpersonal

dimension in men and women...” (1999a, p. 218) and views transpersonal experience as transformational opportunities for growth and wholeness. And on the other hand, most other psychologies label “spiritual experience” or nonordinary consciousness as regressive or pathological.

### ***Wilber’s Spectrum of Development***

Wilber’s “the spectrum of development” is a developmental model that outlines the basic structures of human consciousness (1986). The model highlights the intricacies of consciousness and its evolution through ten stages of development. The tenth and highest attainable level of consciousness is the nondual level. It is the Self-realized station of many mystics and sages. This is unsurprising as transpersonal psychology uniquely looks to “saints, prophets, artists, heroes, and heroines for models of full human development and of the growth-orientated nature of the normal human psyche” (Frager, 2007, p. 2). Wilber looks to the ancient wisdom traditions of Buddhism and Hinduism for examples of transpersonal consciousness. He has incorporated these findings into existent developmental models of Western psychology to formulate his “spectrum of development.” By doing so, Wilber’s model bridges “conventional and contemplative schools of thought” (1986, p. 65) and offers a full spectrum model of human growth and development. Wilber’s “spectrum of development” is a much-utilized model within the field of transpersonal psychology, and serves as the central model for understanding consciousness development within the discipline.

There are ten levels of consciousness found in Wilber’s “spectrum of development.” Every level of development is considered to be a basic structure of consciousness. Each basic structure has certain characteristics, possible pathologies and

shadow aspects associated with them. These levels can be subsumed into three categories. The first category is the pre-egoic and pre-personal levels, which are characterized by *dependence*. Possible pathologies include, psychosis, borderline personality disorder, neurosis and co-dependency issues (Wilber, 2000). The second category is the ego or personal levels, which is characterized by *independence*. At this stage the mind and body aspects undergo a process of integration as the individual becomes more conscious of a personal identity. Possible issues at this level might include being stuck in archetypal roles or unhealthy internalized scripts related to one's family of origin. Other possible issues include the lack of authenticity, narcissism, existential angst and world collapse (Wilber, 2000). The final category is trans-egoic or transpersonal consciousness. At this level the human being has discovered their *interdependent* reality. Possible pathologies include psychic inflation, dark night of the soul, split life goals and subtle grasping to manifest existence (Wilber, 2000). Here is a listing of the first nine basic structures in Wilber's "spectrum of development":

The *pre-personal* (pre-egoic) structures are:

1. Sensori-motor: the material/physical self (matter, sensation)
2. Phantasmic-emotional: the emotional self (magical, emotional)
3. Representative mind: the conceptual self (mythic, safety, power)

The *personal* (egoic) structures are:

4. Rule/Role mind: the socio-centric rule and role orientated self (conformist)
5. Formal-reflexive: the mature ego (introspection, reflexive)
6. Vision-logic: the existential self (existential crisis, world collapse, search for meaning)

The *trans-personal* (trans-egoic) structures:

7. Psychic: the expanding self (beginning stage of spiritual growth)
8. Subtle: the emerging subtle self (soul, direct apprehension of Divine energy)
9. Causal: the formless self (Spirit, subtle dualism between manifest and unmanifest realms)

### ***Stage 10: Nondual Self-realization***

The last stage of Wilber's developmental spectrum is of particular interest for this study. Stage 10 marks the level of nondual consciousness and is the height of Self-realization. Wilber describes the process of nondual Self-realization when he writes,

Passing fully through the state of cessation or unmanifest causal absorption, consciousness is said finally to re-awaken to its prior and eternal abode as absolute Spirit, radiant and all-pervading, one and many, only and all—the complete integration and identity of manifest Form with unmanifest Formless. (1986, p. 74)

At the level of nondual consciousness there is a realization of the Self as “absolute Spirit” (Wilber, 1986). All previous levels of consciousness are both integrated, while simultaneously transcended. In the words of Wilber, nondual consciousness results in “the complete integration and identity of manifest Form with unmanifest Formless.” In this way, the duality of conventional and Absolute<sup>2</sup> realities dissolve, and reality is no longer dichotomous. The individual experiences a “Unitive consciousness” as Maslow (1971) described, in which there is a fusion of “temporal and eternal, of local and

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<sup>2</sup> Conventional reality relates to the reality of the world and the material self. It is finite temporal and fleeting. Absolute reality is Ultimate, infinite, timeless and ever-present.

universal, of relative and absolute [and] of fact and value” (p. 127). Nondual consciousness is a state of “ultimate holism” (p. 127) that is developed in a journey through all levels of consciousness. Robert Frager explains this very point as follows,

Transpersonal psychology is a psychology that goes through the personal to the transpersonal...far from simply transcending our humanity, it is a process of working *through* our humanity, in an inclusive way, to reach the recognition of divinity within. (2007 p. 4)

The ego, or personal consciousness is not overstepped in transcendence, it is worked *through*, as Frager explained. The ego remains and serves the purpose of relating to conventional reality. It retains a functional capacity, yet is often misunderstood to be lost (Wilber, 2000).

In his work *The Atman Project* (1999) Wilber clarifies that nondual consciousness is an ever-present reality and “the summit of human growth” (1999a, p. 222). It is spontaneously realized in the moment and can be “directly intuited or apprehended” (1999a, p. 222). It does not require to be sought, as that would imply a dualism, a subject-object split. Nondual consciousness is not itself another experience but an opening or clearing in which all experiences arise and fall (1999). In nondual consciousness one becomes a kind of witnessing observer, viewing phenomena manifest and cease, without attachment. The term Buddha was a title given to a man who, when asked who he was, said “buddh” or awake. This means that the Buddha had awakened to the true nature of reality. In this very same way every human being has latent within them the same realizable potential, and may awaken to his or her “supreme identity of soul or spirit” (p. 222).

To conclude this section of the literature review on transpersonal psychology Wilber describes his experience of nondual consciousness apprehended during a meditative state. He writes,

... looking deep within the mind, in the very most interior part of the self, when the mind becomes very, very quiet, and one listens very carefully, in that infinite Silence, the soul begins to whisper, and its feather-soft voice takes one far beyond what the mind could ever imagine, beyond anything rationality could possibly tolerate, beyond anything logic can endure. In its gentle whisperings, there are the faintest hints of infinite love, glimmers of a life that time forgot, flashes of a bliss that must not be mentioned, an infinite intersection where the mysteries of eternity breathe life into mortal time, where suffering and pain have forgotten how to pronounce their own names, this secret quiet intersection of time and the very timeless, an intersection called the soul. (2000, p. 106)

### **Why Sufism?**

Sufism is a process of finding your own essence.

Amineh Amelia Pryor, [Psychology in Sufism](#)

Within the literature of transpersonal psychology one finds that the psychological systems of the contemplative schools of Buddhism and Hinduism as well as other branches of eastern philosophy have been well explored. The psychologies of these spiritual traditions have been incorporated into the language and literature of transpersonal psychology. As the literature aims to unite conventional and contemplative psychologies, it is in the interest of transpersonal psychology to become inclusive and representative of all psycho-spiritual models available from the various mystical



traditions. There has not been significant research carried out on Sufi psychology or the contemporary lived experience of Sufi practitioners. Sufi ideas occasionally appear within the literature of transpersonal psychology, however there is very little in-depth research on the intersections of Sufism and healing within the field.

Sufism offers, through its theoretical framework and traditional tools, methods that can help lead to a greater sense of wholeness and wellbeing. Some of the most important works to date on Sufi psychology are: Robert Frager's (1999) work, *Heart, Self and Soul: The Sufi Psychology of Growth, Balance, and Harmony*; Amineh Amelia Pryor's (2000) *Psychology and Sufism: Volume one*; Kabir Helmski's (1992) *Living Presence: a Sufi Way to Mindfulness and the Essential Self*; and Idries Shah's (1978) *Learning How to Learn: Psychology and Spirituality in the Sufi Way*. The majority of these authors have some level of academic training in psychology and clinical practice, which they have in turn incorporated into their analysis and explanation of Sufi psychology. Moreover, these writers identify themselves as practitioners of Sufism and consequently recognize its practical healing benefits. As a result the literature reflects an understanding of the Sufi tradition based on the personal experiences of those traveling the Sufi path. Of the authors mentioned, Amineh Amelia Pryor is a practicing psychotherapist. In her monograph she includes case studies to illustrate the therapeutic and transformational effect of Sufi guidance and practice. She draws on the wisdom of Sufism to address the needs of the contemporary lives of her clients. Overall the literature has an expository and *noetic* characteristic drawn from the wisdom of the author's own experiences.

### ***Sufism and Perennial Philosophy***

The perennial philosophy, which was discussed earlier, speaks to the universal teachings found at the core of all mystical traditions. The central theme of perennial wisdom is the human being's quest to understand their inner reality. To understand the teachings of any spiritual tradition (Buddhism, Hinduism, Christian mysticism, Kabbalah, etc.) is to understand the fundamentals of Sufism. The Sufi perspective on the nature of the self and the process of Self-realization is not unlike other mystical traditions. However, the Sufi explanation of this process is framed in language particular to this mystical tradition. The importance of this study then, is to make a contribution to the field of transpersonal psychology by exploring the Sufi process of Self-realization and its traditional practices.

### ***Sufism Defined***

Sufism is commonly characterized as the inner or esoteric dimension of Islam. This mystical branch is not something peripheral to or separate from Islam but in fact is considered, by the Sufis, to be the very essence of Islam. William Chittick, who is one of the foremost scholars of Sufism, writes, "Sufism can be described as the interiorization and intensification of the Islamic faith" (2000, p. 18). Sufis are primarily concerned with the realization of the Essential Self. The Sufis are called to understand their own essence and to embark on a journey of self-discovery. Amineh Pryor, a psychotherapist and author of *Psychology and Sufism* states that the "ultimate quest of the Sufi is to gain absolute and direct knowledge of the Reality of existence by fully understanding the Self" (2000, p. iii). The Sufi journey culminates in an encounter with Reality, which is mysteriously located at the very core of the human being. Therefore, the journey can be

characterized as a discovery of one's essence or a quest to understand the Self through experiential knowledge. This realization comes through direct apprehension of Spirit, and marks the realization of one's "supreme identity."

### ***Transforming the Nafs***

*Tasawwuf*, the Arabic word for Sufism, comes from the triliteral Arabic root, s/w/f, which has as one of its meanings, "to be pure." This purity refers to the purification of the *nafs*. It is important to note that the Arabic word *nafs* became the equivalent for psyche (or anima), and "was hence understood as soul" (Sviri, 2002, p. 13). It is in the purification of the *nafs* that the *nafs*, the self, is transformed. In its purification false ego-identifications and self-concepts are cleared away so that the Self can arise. Amineh Pryor (2000) explains, "different people are closer to or further away from knowing their own perfection. Through the process of transformation we move by degrees or stages toward our perfect center" (p. 53). Sufi practice aims at transforming the negative distortions created by the ego in order for the aspirant to be brought closer to realizing their inner perfection. An 11<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Saint Jalal ad-Din Rumi explains;

... the great ocean is that same substance as your own water, it is all from one self and one source. But for those elements that do not feel the attraction of familiarity, this failure does not come from the water itself, but from the pollution in that water. (2000, p. 62)

The apparitions of the false self "pollute" the clear water of Essence, and obstruct us from knowing our inner reality. One of the most common metaphors in Sufism, based essentially on the idea of purification, involves the idea of polishing the "mirror of the heart." The innermost heart is the location of ones' perfect center, which is revealed

through clearing the attachments and defilements of the ego. This clearing is figuratively achieved by polishing the heart through meditation and prayer so that the mirror of the heart might reflect, purely and uninhibitedly, the Divine reality. The centrality of the heart within Sufism and its function will be discussed in greater detail in this review.

“Sufism is an unbroken mystical tradition with over fourteen hundred years of history” (Pryor, 2000, p. 1). Sufi psychology is a highly sophisticated psychology “grounded in millions of hours of ‘clinical’ experience of spiritual guidance” (Pryor, 2000, p. 1). Sufism has a deep understanding of human nature and offers tools for inner transformation required to facilitate the journey towards nondual Self-realization. There are three main components of the human being according to Sufi psychology. These components are the *nafs* (the psyche), the *qulb* (the heart) and the *ruh* (the Spirit). In Sufism the process of Self-realization is achieved by traversing the layers of the *nafs*. The Sufis claim that the *nafs* is the “psychological structure” of the human being created by the interaction of Spirit and matter (Frager, 1999, p. 49). The *nafs* is the main component of the human being and acts as a processing center for the embodied Spirit. It mediates between the realm of Spirit and finite existence. However, through the formation of the *nafs* the connection between body and Spirit is often distorted. As a result, the reality that exists at the level of Spirit is no longer apparent to the human being.

Sufism often speaks about the two realities of form and formless existence, or inner and outer realities. Rumi captures the struggle of the *nafs* as it is pulled between these two *seemingly* distinct dimensions of existence. He says,

Its outward says “I am this and no more.” Its inward says, “Look well, before and behind! Its outward denies, saying, “The inward is nothing.” The inward says, “We will show you. Wait!” (Chittick, 1983, p. 21)

At this level the *nafs* perceives a dichotomy between Spirit and form.<sup>3</sup> However, at the height of nondual Self-realization this dichotomy proves to be illusory. For most people, however, the *nafs* begins to identify itself with the level of gross matter alone. The self becomes fixated on its fulfillment through materialism and operates mainly on survival and pleasure or correspondingly, by fear and desire (Helminski, 1992).

As the *nafs* constructs an identity that is dependent on material and finite existence the real Self, or Spirit, becomes hidden. The real Self is hidden beneath layers of veils that conceal and disguise *Its* reality. These veils are ego desires, identifications and constructs that are products of the *exteriorization* of the human being and cause ignorance of one’s inner Essential nature. With each layer or veil that the *nafs* constructs it becomes distanced from the reality of its true nature. The “perceptual” distance between self and Self is often spoken of within the Sufi tradition through different metaphors. Rumi, in this instance, employs the imagery of the wailing reed flute, which was plucked from the reedbed and longs to return. He writes, “listen to the story told by the reed, of being separated ‘Since I was cut from the reedbed, I have made this crying sound’” (Barks, 1997, p. 17). In this stanza the reed flute symbolizes the human being, who is removed from their paradisaical state in eternity, and is exiled in the world. The reed flute has a cry or lament, which is metaphorically the yearning of the soul to return to its primordial state of unity with God. Rumi writes to this point, “anyone apart from

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<sup>3</sup> Otherwise known as conventional and Absolute reality.

someone he loves understands what I say. Anyone pulled from a source longs to go back” (Barks, 1997, p. 18). The metaphor of romantic love points to the longing of the human being to make their return to the Supreme Beloved.

To be in connection and full awareness of the Essential Self is to be connected to the source of one’s being. It is in the separation and “perceptual distance” from the Beloved that the human being experiences suffering and in some sense *primordial* homesickness. The existential longing for Union can never be satiated through the cravings, achievements or desires for “things of this world,” but requires that one looks beyond this world. The Sufis believe that one can meet the Beloved through a voluntary spiritual death, the death of the ego, before the involuntary death of the physical self (*maut*). Through ego-death (*fana*) one transcends the personal, ego consciousness, and enters into a state of pure consciousness or “supreme identity.” In Sufi understanding the journey towards nondual Self-realization is two-fold. It involves (1) annihilation of the ego (*fana*) and (2) subsequent absorption and subsistence in the Divine reality (*baqa*). There is a popular saying in the Sufi tradition that can be traced back to the prophet Muhammad, who the Sufis consider to be the first mystic of Islam. He is reported to have said, “Die before you die.” By this he meant, according to the Sufis, that one should break one’s attachment to the sensory world, to the attachments that create a false sense of self, so that one may thereby live through and in the Self.

### ***The Seven Levels of the Nafs***

Robert Frager (1999) outlines the psycho-spiritual model of development within the Sufi tradition and explains that there are seven levels (*maqamat*) that the self has to traverse in order to reach the final level of Selfhood. The “spiritual traveler” or *salik* is

one who traverses this path through the various stations of self-realization. There is considerable fluidity in this schematization, as the wayfarer can be at a certain station (*maqamat*) but experience different states (*hals*). Accordingly someone at the lowest levels of the *nafs* can have what Maslow described as a “peak-experience”, where they enter into the highest reality of Self-realization. Without traversing through the seven stations, however, these peak-experiences will only be momentary. Nevertheless these momentary peak-experiences provide the seeker with a glimpse of Ultimate realization, and may inspire them in their journey.

The levels below represent the Sufi model of development presented by Frager (1999) in his *Heart, Self & Soul*. They are based on ancient Sufi understandings that have been elucidated by the mystics within this tradition for over a thousand years. Each of the seven levels represents a more limited or more realized degree of consciousness depending on where one falls on the spectrum. The first level represents the most limited degree of consciousness and the seventh, the greatest level:

1. The Tyrannical *Nafs*: This initial level marks a domineering and commanding *nafs*. It is a slave to pleasure and gratification through the accumulation of “riches, power, and ego satisfaction no matter what the cost” (p. 52). This *nafs* is considered to be the level of the addict and the psychopath. Frager adds, “at this level we are addicts in denial, dominated by uncontrollable addiction, yet we refuse to recognize that we even have a problem” (p. 53). Frager continues by describing the base *nafs* as so consuming that we are subject to its control. The worst addiction of the tyrannical *nafs* is the addiction to praise and adulation because it is so deeply rooted in the psyche (1999). He adds that

this “kind of addiction is not well described in the literature of psychology because most of us, including psychological theorists, suffer from it. We are in the middle of it and so we cannot see this addiction in others or in ourselves” (p. 53). The Sufis make an important insight about this stage of the *nafs*, which is that it is quite possible that the tyrannical *nafs* will engage in the externalities of religion, however, such displays of religiosity are part of an “empty show designed to impress others” (p. 52).

2. The Regretful *Nafs*: This *nafs* is aware of its current state, whereas under the tyrannical *nafs* we do not “realize the harm we do to ourselves and others” (p. 66). This level of awareness marks the advent of the critical self wherein one can reflect regretfully on one’s actions and with some degree of self-criticism. Frager comments that at this stage we “begin to understand the negative effects of our habitual self-centered approach to our world, even though we do not have the ability to change” (p. 66). This *nafs* is still greatly concerned with egotism and self-love and is characterized by “spiritual pride, hypocrisy, rigidity of belief... [and] an emphasis on seeking worldly and sensual pleasure” (p. 67). It is important to note that the strongest characteristic that needs to be overcome at this stage is hypocrisy. Hypocrisy, in this context, relates to being incongruent in what one says and what one does. Although the regretful *nafs* may have some insight into their hurtful behavior they are unwilling to act on this awareness.
3. The Inspired *Nafs*: At this level there is a genuine feeling of love that begins to develop for oneself and for others. A sincere engagement in spiritual



practice is likely. Spiritual practice such as meditation or prayer is no longer mechanical or performative. Some of the traits that characterize this *nafs* include “generosity, satisfaction with small things, surrender...humility...” (p. 70). Repentance is characteristic at this stage yet does not refer to “self-blame” or “regret” but to an awareness of any pain we inflict on others and on ourselves. Repentance, or *tawba* in Arabic, means to turn away. *Tawba* requires one to turn away from any behavior that is lacking in integrity. Another key characteristic at the level is inspiration. Inspiration comes from a connection to “the inner voice of guidance... the heart or conscience” (p. 70). The chief concern or weak point at this level is “psychic inflation.” The inspired *nafs* may experience inspired states of spiritual or psychic illumination. As a result one might “feel good” about oneself and experience a sense of spiritual pride or an undeserved sense of accomplishment.

4. The Serene *Nafs*: This level is characterized as the *nafs*-at-rest. The *nafs* is no longer easily affected or pulled by the whims of the lower *nafs*. At this station the *nafs* is less likely to fall back into earlier levels indicating a level of stability. Some descriptions of this station include letting go, trusting in the “Divine order”, not fighting or resisting life, accepting whatever arises and ceases around us, and feeling a sense of non-attachment, gratitude, contentment and tranquility (1999). The state of serene *nafs* is described in a Sufi poem cited by Frager (1999):

One person is content with pain, another with cure;

One is content with union, another with separation;

I am content with whatever the Beloved desires,  
Be it cure or pain, union or separation. (p. 78)

5. The Pleased *Nafs*: At this station the *nafs* is pleased with the trials of life and feels continually supported by compassion, mercy and love. As a result these qualities flow outward, towards others, with greater ease. The spiritual growth at this level is more subtle and inward. A central aspect of this station is the constant contemplation and remembrance (*dhikr*) on Divine reality. At this stage we are “no longer split between our material desires and our desires for God” (p. 80). There is a tremendous sense of healing as one progresses towards wholeness.
6. The Pleasing *Nafs*: At this level the *nafs* achieves genuine inner unity and wholeness, “we experience the world as whole and unified” (p. 82). Rumi describes this station when he writes “... the world appears to be a multiplicity, just as a shattered mirror reflects many different reflections of the same image. If we heal the breaks in the mirror and it becomes unbroken once again, it will then reflect only a single image” (p. 84). The affirmation of Unity, and Divine Oneness are the chief insights at this level. The causal level in Wilber’s model coincides with this station of the *nafs*.
7. The Pure *Nafs*: The final stage in the purification of the *nafs* is appropriately called the purified *nafs*. This level of attainment is one of complete transcendence. This station marks the death of ego consciousness (*fana*) and total absorption in the Divine reality (*baqa*). The *nafs*, is completely cleansed of false attachments and limited identifications, therefore, when all of the veils

and layers of the false self dissolve only Spirit (*ruh*) remains. This level corresponds to Wilber's 10<sup>th</sup> level in his "spectrum of development." It is the level of nondual Self-realization, which is the height of realization and the pinnacle of transformation available to the aspirant. At this station all dualities collapse, the inner and outer world become one. According to this Sufis this nondual station cannot be explained or defined, it can only be approximated or conveyed through metaphor, symbolism and creative expression. Rumi writes:

Oneness is on the other side of descriptions and states. Nothing but duality enters speech's playing-field. So, either live in this duality, like the double-seeing man, or sew up your mouth and be happily silent! (Chittick, 1983, p. 275)

To go beyond the ego is to transcend language and thought. This station is beyond normal comprehension. It is one that is ineffable, beyond description, and is best expressed not through logical prose but poetry, symbolism and metaphor. Again, in the words of Rumi, "If you could get rid of yourself just once, the secret of secrets would open to you" (Frager, 1999, p. 87). In this process of negating the self, he writes, "the face of the unknown, hidden beyond the universe would appear on the mirror of your perception" (Frager, 1999, p. 87). The "Mirror of your perception" is, for Rumi, a metaphor for the mirror of the heart. When the mirror of the heart is polished it can reflect the entirety of the cosmos. As Rumi states, the heart's mirror has no limits; it possesses "the infinite, formless Form of the Unseen" (Chittick, 1983 p. 38). The heart is the very center and core of the human being; it is a temple, the site of Divine presence. By polishing the heart-mirror, one's ego is transformed and knowledge of the Divine, latent in the heart,

will manifest itself. Amineh Amelia Pryor (2000) highlights the centrality of the heart in Sufism when she writes,

The heart is the center of life. If the heart stops, life as we know it stops.

Therefore, we must pay attention to our hearts. The heart can teach us about balance and it continually beats to honour life. If we concentrate on our hearts by listening to our heartbeats, from within, for even one minute we may have a taste of that harmony and tranquility that exists within Being. (p. 59)

Rumi often refers to the two kinds of intelligence; knowledge that is acquired through learning and study, which he calls partial intelligence, and knowledge that comes through the heart-center, otherwise an intuitive intelligence (Chittick, 1983). Rumi names the intuitive intelligence the “Universal Intellect” because it is available to all of human creation (Chittick, 1983). The partial intellect, often consisting of book and scholarly learning cannot provide experiential knowledge or direct apprehension of Spirit. At the third level of spiritual growth, the level of the inspired *nafs*, the “inner voice of guidance” becomes activated, which signifies the opening of the spiritual heart center. As one works through the layers of the *nafs* the heart continues to expand, which corresponds to the expansion of consciousness as the heart possess all knowledge of Reality.

### ***The Seven Facets of the Soul***

In the Sufi tradition there is another manner in which the seven levels of the human being are presented. The term *nafs*, has been defined as psyche, and may be interpreted to mean self or soul. In this next schematization the *nafs* is interpreted to mean soul. The human being is understood to have one soul, and this one soul has seven facets. “Each [facet of the soul] represents a different stage of evolution” (Frager, 1999,

p. 96). The following chart is an outline of the seven souls and their corresponding features.

Table 1: The Sufi Conceptualization of the Seven Levels of the Soul (Frager, 1999, p. 101):

<i>Soul</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Body System</i>	<i>Excess</i>	<i>Positive Features</i>
Mineral	Spine	skeletal system	overly rigid	inner support
Vegetable	Liver	digestive system	laziness, overactivity, lack of nutrition	health, healing, nourishment
Animal	Heart	circulatory system	anger, greed, addiction to pleasure	Motivation
Personal	Brain	nervous system	egotism, weak ego	intelligence, healthy ego
Human	spiritual heart		Sentimentality	compassion, creativity
Secret	spiritual heart (inner heart)		world rejection	nonattachment, wisdom
Secret of Secrets	spiritual heart (innermost heart)		None	union with God

According to the Sufis the first four facets of the soul, the mineral, the vegetable, the animal and the personal perish with the body after death, as they are located within the physical organs and are thus tied to the body (Frager, 1999). The last three facets of the soul, including the human soul, the secret soul, and the secret of secrets are located in the spiritual heart and are bound to Spirit. These levels are absorbed back into the reality of Spirit at the moment of one's physical death. The symbolism of the multi-faceted soul

accounts for the different levels of experience one has in the world, and affirms the need for the soul to be balanced and fully integrated at each level. Although the lower facets of the soul that relate to the physical body perish at death, they have an influence on the balance of the upper ethereal levels. For example, the treatment of our physical body, including the actions we commit with every limb leave an imprint on the soul, and affect its development. In this way, it is understood by the Sufis, that each facet of the soul has a valuable function for the human being.

The reality of the mineral, vegetable and animal souls require the human being to take care of the physical body, through exercise and diet. Any kind of deprivation or excess related to any of the facets of the soul cause an imbalance in the human being. An imbalance of the lower facets of the soul will effect and cause a lack of balance at the higher levels. Frager (1999) discusses in his work *Heart, Self and Soul: The Sufi psychology of growth, balance and harmony* that Western psychology tends to stop at the personal soul (p. 135). “According to western psychology, we have to focus on examining our childhood and cleaning up all our personality problems...” (p 135). This is why most of Western psychology, Frager suggests, “never gets to the spiritual and tends to get stuck at the level of the personal or animal soul” (p. 135). Frager explains that the personal soul is related to the personality and even though “our egos and personalities may lead us astray” our personalities serve a functional and valuable tool as “we need them in order to relate to other people and understand their personalities” (p. 140). However, to achieve the height of realization, according to Sufism, a holistic integration must be achieved at all levels. This calls the human being to become fully aware of the need to balance and integrate all facets of the soul during their lifetime.

The Sufi way of life is holistic in nature as it integrates physical, emotional and psychological needs with spiritual practice. In Sufism the goal is to be (echoing the words of the Gospel) “in the world but not of the world.” Sufism does not suggest that one should renounce the world and retreat from society, as is prescribed in other male ascension paths. A contemporary scholar of Sufism writes that Sufism encourages,

The integration of the active and contemplative lives so that... [the human being] is able to remain receptive inwardly to the influences of heaven and lead an intense inner contemplative life while outwardly remaining both active in a world which he moulds according to his inner spiritual nature, instead of becoming its prisoner. (Nasr, 1991, p.37)

Despite the emphasis that Sufism places on *interiorization*, it does not encourage social isolation. Instead, the contemplative life is to be sought *in the world*. The human being can become Self-realized, he or she can climb to the heights of the mystical stations while remaining fully engaged in the world, by having a family, working, being a community member and a contributor to society. This particular perspective of Sufism offers a unique contribution to transpersonal literature.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has provided a review of the literature beginning with the origins of transpersonal psychology and the earliest discussions of the phenomenon central to this study. The literature of Western psychology, particularly the works of Abraham Maslow and his study of self-actualized persons and peak-experiences, coupled with the philosophical underpinnings of perennial philosophy, shaped the contemporary school of transpersonal psychology. The phenomenon understudy, namely, nondual Self-

realization, is an inquiry into states of consciousness beyond the ego. For this reason Ken Wilber's (1986) "spectrum of development" was included as it brings together both conventional models of development akin to Western psychology with transpersonal levels of consciousness particular to the contemplative traditions. As this study is intended to explore the process of nondual Self-realization among Sufi practitioners, this review provided a brief overview of some of the most relevant Sufi concepts related to this topic. In particular, Robert Frager's (1999) analysis of the ancient Sufi conceptualization of the levels of the *nafs*, as well as the seven facets of the soul, provided a comprehensive understanding of the Self-realization process as it is conceived within the Sufi tradition.



## **Chapter III - Research Design and Methodology**

### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the methodology and research procedure of this study. Phenomenological-hermeneutics is the chief methodology underlying this investigation into five Sufi practitioner's journeys towards nondual Self-realization. In addition, a transpersonal phenomenology was used to support the intuitive orientation required to interpret transcendent and nonordinary experiences of consciousness. In this way, the methodology is directly related to and supportive of the transpersonal inquiry of this research. The philosophical underpinnings of the blended methodologies have directed the manner in which the research was carried out. Each of the methodologies has a particular epistemological and ontological assumption that has shaped the mode of inquiry, as well as the type of research findings. These assumptions have informed the central role of the researcher as implicated within the study, and the role of the participants as co-researchers. It is understood that the researchers own epistemological position "will impact every aspect of the research process, including topic selection..." (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p. 13). For this reason the researchers connection to this topic was explored in the opening chapter.

Following a discussion of the philosophical underpinnings of both methodologies, the research procedure is described. This includes a detailed description of the recruitment and selection process of the co-researchers, as well as the narrative aspects of dramaturgical interviewing. The trustworthiness and possible research limitations of this study are discussed and lastly, issues pertaining to compliance with ethical standards are addressed.

This chapter opens with an analysis of the three strands of epistemology

defined by Ken Wilber (1996). This will allow us to better appreciate the significance of phenomenological-hermeneutics and transpersonal-phenomenology and will illuminate their respective ontological and epistemological assumptions.

### **Wilber's Three Strands of Epistemology**

Wilber (1996), a key theorist of transpersonal psychology, describes three modes of knowing or “eyes” through which the human being can acquire knowledge. These three modes or “eyes” are: the eye of flesh, the eye of the mind and the eye of contemplation. Wilber describes them as eyes, a symbolic organ of apprehension; because it is the eye “through which we perceive our selves and our world” (Rich, 2004, p. 179). Wilber explains that each mode of knowing corresponds to a particular type of inquiry and level of consciousness. He writes,

there is a great spectrum of human consciousness; and this means that men and women have available to them a spectrum of different modes of knowing, each of which discloses a different type of world (a different world space, with difference objects, different subjects, different modes of space time, different motivations, and so on). (Wilber, 1996, pp. xii-xiii)

#### ***The Three ‘Eyes’***

Wilber (1996) describes the eye of flesh as “the realm of *sensibilia*” (p. 44). The realm of *sensibilia* refers to the level of empirical inquiry and pertains to objects that are perceived in the world of time and space. It is comprised of all sensory experience particular to phenomena that exist at the *gross* level of reality. The gross level simply means the concrete or empirical level. An empirical study, for instance, is concerned with the measurement of gross objects as distinct from one another. According to Rich (2004)

the “eye of flesh is the eye of sensory experience and as such it is the empirical eye, empirical meaning capable of detection by the five human senses or their extensions...” (p. 180). The scientific enterprise of the last 150 years has shaped the natural sciences into a paradigm that operates from this mode of knowing, through the eye of flesh, or “empiric-analytic inquiry” (Wilber, 1996, p. 44). Within this framework, knowledge production is restricted to empirical data and assumes that only physical reality can be measured.

Wilber describes the eye of mind as the mode of knowing through the mental eye, and deals with the realm of *intelligibilia*. For Wilber the mental eye participates “in a world of ideas, images, logic and concepts” (1996, p. 156). The mental eye is both a distinct mode of knowing as well as somewhat dependent on the eye of flesh. Wilber describes their relatedness when he states that the eye of mind “rises far above the eye of flesh; in imagination, it can *picture* sensory objects not immediately present and thus transcend the flesh’s imprisonment in the simply present world; in logic, it can internally operate upon sensorimotor objects...” (1996, p. 156). Therefore, the mental eye cannot be reduced to the eye of flesh, although it does rely on much of its information from the eye of flesh, yet it can perceive things that are not visible to the senses. Mathematic logic is one example of knowledge acquired through the mental eye. The logic that is used to “reason” out a math problem is transempirical because it functions at a level that is beyond the senses. Wilber states that the mental eye is a mode of inquiry within the psyche that “perceives the subjective and inter-subjective nature of the self and [the] world” (Rich, 2004, p. 179). Language, imagination, interpretation, insight and creativity are all functions of the mental eye. In the human sciences phenomenological-

hermeneutics is a suitable methodology to use for researching aspects of human experience through the mental eye. Wilber (1996) makes special reference to philosophy, psychology and sociology as fields which use mental-phenomenological and hermeneutic investigation.

The third eye is the eye of contemplation and perceives the realm of *transcendilia*. This eye is also described as the eye of Spirit. Wilber (1996) identifies inquiry at this level is often facilitated through religious and meditative practices. *Transcendilia* is the direct apprehension of Spirit or pure Universal consciousness experienced beyond the limitations of the ego. It deals directly with mystical and profound experiences of nonordinary consciousness, often of a nondual nature, wherein subject and object merge as one. Self-transcendence, peak-moments, epiphanies, experiences beyond space and time constraints, often called “vertical time”, are epistemically processed through the eye of contemplation. Wilber (1996) calls this dimension of human experience “transrational, translogical and transmental” (p. 158). Since its relation to rationality is like rationality’s relation to sense-knowledge, it can properly be described as supra-rational. It is likened to gnosis or intuitive knowing that is spontaneous and sometimes considered supernatural.

The eye of contemplation includes and transcends the mental eye. For instance, one may have a transcendent experience through the contemplative eye, however, in order to convey one’s experience one will enter into the “playing-field” of language (Chittick, 1983, p. 275). The once ineffable transrational experience (since it is beyond description, language, time and space) will be filtered through the mind’s eye for the

purpose of conveying the experience.<sup>4</sup> In the filtering process the experience of inevitably undergoes reductionism. Describing the experience of transpersonal or transegoic consciousness through the eye of Spirit, Friedman and Macdonald (2002) write,

the best way of understanding or knowing an experience or state of consciousness is to directly experience it oneself, any attempt to either communicate that to another or, indeed, to internally process that experience with conceptual thought is bound to be at least somewhat reductionistic. (p. 105)

Essentially, Friedman and Macdonald highlight a problem that mystics and sages have experienced from the beginning of time, namely the inability to express the fullness of their experience in language. Since language is a function of the mental eye, the difficulties involved in conveying transcendent experiences through language are manifold.

### ***Wilber's Verification Procedure***

In Ken Wilber's (1990) writing *Eye to Eye: the Quest for the New Paradigm*, he outlines three basic strands that might be used to verify any level of inquiry. According to Wilber, data accumulated through any of the three "eyes" of scientific research has the same three strands of verification (1990). The data that is rendered through the eyes of flesh, mind and Spirit are provable and verifiable based on the following three procedures. Firstly, the *instrumental injunction* is "always of the form" and is the act or action that transpires at the very outset of the inquiry (Wilber, 1990, p. 44). The second

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<sup>4</sup> For this reason an intuitive interpretation of the data was implemented through the contemplative eye. Transpersonal phenomenology is the methodology supporting this mode of inquiry. Transpersonal awareness is necessary to acquire insight, knowledge and understanding of consciousness at transpersonal levels.

strand is *intuitive apprehension*, which for Wilber denotes “a cognitive grasp” or the “immediate data-apprehension” (1990, p. 44). The third and final strand in Wilber’s verification procedure is *communal confirmation*, which involves the “checking of results (apprehensions or data) with others who have adequately completed the injunctive and apprehensive strands” (1990, p. 44).

Wilber posits that all three strands of verification can be applied to any results generated through the three levels of inquiry. Take for instance inquiry into insights and epiphanies generated through meditative practice. The nature of this study would encompass inquiry at the level of Spirit or through the eye of *transcendilia*. The instrumental injunction of this potential research study might be several hours of meditation over a span of a year. The second strand in the research would be the *intuitive apprehension*, whereby the data is accumulated. In a qualitative study this might include collecting stories and experiences participants would have from their hours of meditation practice. Finally, the communal aspect would be fulfilled by comparing and confirming the results generated from among the participants in the study, and with other studies or literature that explore the same phenomenon. In this way, Wilber provides a solid argument against what he calls the “problem of proof” by asserting that “all modes of valid cognitive inquiry- empirical, rational, and transcendental” (1990, p. 45), have the same verification procedures.

### **Rumi’s Two Kinds of Intelligence**

For the reason that this study is focused on the Sufi journey I would like to draw from one of the most important figures within the Sufi tradition to compliment Wilber’s epistemological assertions. Jalal ad-Din Rumi, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Muslim saint, explained

that knowing can be derived from two kinds of intelligence: the partial intellect and the Universal Intellect (Chittick, 1983). According to Rumi the partial intellect acquires knowledge from sources outside of oneself. This would include knowledge acquired through book learning, from teachers, friends and so on. This mode of knowing can be likened to Wilber's description of the eye of mind. The partial intellect corresponds to the functioning of the mind, and comprises of facts and logic.

The Universal Intellect is a faculty of knowing that is located within the deepest core of the human being. According to Seyyed Hossein Nasr, this Intelligence is a Divine gift, "which pierces through the veil of *maya* and is able to know reality as such" (1989, p. 146). The Universal Intellect allows one to perceive what is not apparent, and apprehend Reality beyond its illusory appearance. It is the intuitive center that receives impressions from Spirit. This intuitive center enables the human being to tap into an infinite resource of wisdom, and is often described as the spiritual heart. One awakens the heart by quieting the mind, which has traditionally been achieved through various spiritual exercises such as meditation and contemplative prayer. The intuition of the spiritual heart, the "knowing heart", can be likened to Wilber's eye of contemplation. The practices of Sufism have one central purpose, namely to facilitate the opening of the spiritual heart. The profound mystical experiences experienced through Spirit allow for greater insight into one's true and lasting nature. Since, it is this nature that is, in its very essence, connected to the Absolute reality, or God.

These two modes of knowing were employed in the collection and the interpretation of the data. Phenomenological-hermeneutics corresponds to inquiry through the partial intellect or the eye of the mind. Transpersonal-phenomenology is

connected to the Universal Intellect, the intuitive heart-center, and refers to inquiry through the eye of contemplation.

### **Inquiry in the Human and Natural Sciences**

Wilhelm Dilthey was part of a group of intellectuals of the late 1800's known as the German Classicists. The philosophical orientation of this group was heavily based on the foundational works of Schleiermacher (1768-1834). However, it was Dilthey who first distinguished between the human sciences and the natural sciences, as "inner" and "outer" knowledge (Chessick, 1990). It is understood that Dilthey drew this distinction from the earlier works of an Italian philosopher, Vico, who introduced the concepts of "inner" and "outer" knowledge (Dilthey, 1978). Expanding on Vico's work, Dilthey claimed that outer knowledge is "the laws of the causal order of natural phenomena" and inner knowledge is one's "world-view", which aims to "understand mind" (Chessick, 1990, p. 246).

Dilthey argued that the human sciences, *geisteswissenschaften*, should have its own unique methods of inquiry that are distinct from the rigorous scientific methods used in the natural sciences (1978). This is because "inner" knowledge requires entering "into the interior domains and symbolic depths [of the human being] which cannot be accessed by exterior empiricism but only by introspection and interpretation" (Wilber, 2000, p. 161). Dilthey's work in distinguishing these two branches of inquiry led to the development of various methods able to support the inquiry of human experience, such as the branch of phenomenology.



## **Phenomenology**

Phenomenology is an important methodology for this research project, as it is primarily grounded in the study of lived experience. It has supported the investigation into the lived experience of five co-researchers and their journeys in Sufism. The philosophical foundations of phenomenology that arose in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century by Edmund Husserl are premised on the study of consciousness. Drawing upon Husserl's assertions, phenomenology understands consciousness to be "our primordial window on the world" (Osborne, 1990, p. 80). From this perspective, in order for one to understand human experience, one must first understand the workings of consciousness.

Husserl argued that consciousness always holds an object of intentionality. In other words, consciousness is always conscious of something. He put forth the idea that knowledge is gained by "consciousness-of-the-world" (Husserl, 1970; Keanery, 1994, p. 30) and frequently spoke of "the intentional object of external perception" (1977, p. 141). It appears then that the underlying assumption of phenomenology is that lived experience, as defined by human consciousness, is a product of the conceptual and mental mind alone.

Phenomenology is useful to understand the basic structure of lived experience. However it is limited by Husserl's (1976) theory of intentionality. For instance, in peak moments or profound mystical experience where consciousness moves into transcendent states, consciousness is without object. In nondual Being there is no subject-object divide as all dualisms collapse. For this reason a methodology that considers consciousness to be trans-intentional is required. Therefore, transpersonal phenomenology was necessary to comprehensively and holistically describe the co-researcher's journeys in Sufism. Transpersonal phenomenology will be discussed further on in this chapter.

### *Van Manen's Methodological Procedures*

Max Van Manen, a contemporary philosopher on phenomenology, outlines a series of possible methodological produces for qualitative research. The methodological procedures that will guide this study are premised upon five of van Manen's (1990) prescribed research activities. The following five research activities provide an orientation to the research process. They are:

- i. Turning to a phenomenon that is of serious interest, which the researcher seeks to illuminate.
- ii. Investigating the experience as it is lived rather than how it is conceptualized.
- iii. Reflecting and drawing out central themes to “achieve perspectival understanding of a phenomenon” (Osborne, 1990, p. 82).
- iv. Balancing the research context by considering parts and the whole.
- v. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting. (p. 46)

These five steps outline the main methodological tasks undertaken by the researcher in this study. The details of each stage in the research process are outlined in the section on research procedure in this chapter.

### **Phenomenological-hermeneutics**

The chief methodological approach of this research is phenomenological-hermeneutics. Martin Heidegger (1962) who is the foundational thinker of modern hermeneutics was responsible for fusing phenomenology with hermeneutics. He proposed a phenomenological-hermeneutic methodology, which is a blending of perspectives from both traditions.

A phenomenological approach was employed in this study in order to illuminate

the Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization. This was achieved primarily by engaging in a sensitive reading of the interview data and presenting the findings in a thematic analysis. The hermeneutic influence impacted how the research was conducted. The following aspects in this research study, that are particular to phenomenological-hermeneutics include: the relationship between the researcher and the research participants, the role of the implicated researcher, the approach to the data analysis employed through the hermeneutic circle, and finally, the importance of representing the fecundity of the individual case.

### ***Researcher and Co-researcher's Relationship***

The philosophical orientation of phenomenological-hermeneutics provides an assumption of how knowledge is created, and in doing so, defines the relationship between the researcher and the participants in the study. The perspective of this methodology is such that the hierarchical division between the subject and object of a study, upheld in traditional research paradigms, is discarded. Within this framework it is understood that there is a collaborative engagement towards the co-creation of meaning and knowledge production. The dialectic process between the researcher and co-researcher is collaborative, transactional and reciprocal (Nagy Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2006, p.15). Therefore, the term co-researcher was chosen to identify the “subject” or “participant” of this study. Following Osborne (1990), the purpose of this title is to emphasize the “the co-operative and voluntary nature of the research” (p. 82). “Co-researcher” is the preferred title employed for the participants in this study. Let us turn now to examine the hermeneutic paradigm, and my role as the researcher in this study.

### *The Implicated Researcher*

The seminal German philosopher Heidegger (1962) emphasized that our mode of existence is one of “being-in-the-world” or *Dasein*. His main ontological assumption of *Dasein* or being-in-the-world, places the researcher at the very center of her research. From this perspective the researcher should not claim “neutrality” in relation to her topic, but embrace the way she is connected to, or implicated by her research topic. Heidegger argued that we are already immersed in a historical and cultural context, and that we cannot disentangle a pure and detached rationality from our particular mode of existence. He maintained that all human beings function out of a world-view that is essential to their existence, and which is value-laden (Dilthey, 1978). In this way, “the researcher is never *tabula rasa*” (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000, p. 68), and cannot maintain an unapproachable “objective” researching stance (Gadamer, 1985). She cannot stand objectively apart from the object of study, as a detached value-free researcher because of the fundamental principle of ontological Beingness. The researcher’s biases, prejudices and interpretations about the topic cannot be avoided. These prejudices, however, do not pose a threat to the validity of the research, which is a point that will be explained in the section outlining the hermeneutic circle.

The particular philosophical stance, which provides an orientation for the researcher, is very different from phenomenology. Phenomenology perceives the “unavoidable presence of the researcher” (Osborne, 1990, p. 81) and attempts to resolve the potential bias and prejudice the researcher may bring to their study through a process called *bracketing* (Osborne, 1990). In the bracketing process the researcher undergoes rigorous self-reflection and self-reflexivity to highlight any preconceptions, prejudices

and biases that may “colour” their research. Through this process phenomenology attempts to resolve the predicament of the researcher’s unavoidable personhood. Again, the hermeneutic tradition holds a very unique philosophical orientation about the role of the researcher that is tied into the ontological assumptions of *Dasein*.

The hermeneutic tradition does away with the notion of bracketing all together. The hermeneutic perspective rejects any claim to pure objectivity and points out that to have a method is to already have an interpretation (Gadamer, 1985). In the choosing of a method one has already asserted a subjective influence in the research process. This is because all methodologies are tied to particular assumptions about reality and knowledge production. For this reason, according to the hermeneutic tradition, all sense of objectivity is false (Chessick, 1990, p. 258). The research process of this study is heavily indebted to the hermeneutic position, which locates the researcher as implicated in the research process.

### **Phenomenological Approach to Data Analysis**

Within phenomenology there are different approaches to data analysis. Colaizzi (1978) and Giorgi (1975) present a very structured approach to organizing interview data. The themes rendered from each sentence of the interview text are organized into clusters of themes and often presented in tabular form in a hierarchical procedure. Osborne (1990) writes that this hierarchical procedure “defines the structure of the phenomenon” (p. 85). Edmond Husserl, who is recognized as the father of phenomenology, maintains there is a transparency to experience that reveals *itself* and can stand on its own (1970). In this way Husserl claims the data will speak for itself and that the architecture of the phenomenon

will be understood based on “what is manifest” (Heidegger, 1996, p. 25). In other words, from a Husserlian perspective one approaches the data at face value.

For this study I did not apply a purely phenomenological approach, rather I was focused on “interpreting the data rather than doing a content analysis” (Osborne, 1990, p. 85). This approach to data analysis comes from the influence of the interpretive, hermeneutic lens. For example, Heidegger inquires into what is non-manifest about the experience, i.e. what meaning is not necessarily transparent in the data but hidden beyond the surface of the data. Gadamer (1981) notes that the hermeneutic task involves “getting behind the surface phenomena and data” (p. 100), and in doing so one may interpret the concealed meaning of the data (Langian, 1991). In having taken on the approach of phenomenological-hermeneutics I was able to draw out the deep structure of meaning within the data. I was able present the phenomena in a descriptive narrative (Alapack, 1986), which required a sensitivity and perceptiveness in relating to the data (Osborne, 1990). The following section describes the hermeneutic circle, which was employed in both the research process and writing of this study.

### **The Hermeneutic Circle**

The hermeneutic tradition is referred to as the “interpretive perspective” (Nagy Hesse-Biber, 2006, p. 14) and the etymology of hermeneutics comes from Greek for “translate” and “interpret.” The chief assumption of the hermeneutic tradition is that interpretation is intrinsic to the social world. Interpretation is necessary and, in some sense, an automatic function in our attempt to understand and make sense of anything we might encounter that is foreign to us. Therefore the hermeneutic circle constitutes the

hermeneutic art, which is, in fact “the art of understanding something that appears alien and unintelligible to us” (Gadamer, 1986, p. 141).

The hermeneutic circle was the central analytic technique employed during the research interviews and data analysis of this study. With direct consideration of the interview process, the hermeneutic circle was employed as a way to bridge the gap between the context of the researcher and the co-researchers in order to achieve the central act of hermeneutic understanding (Rodgers, 2005, p. 149). The hermeneutic circle is a dialogical exchange and marks the “reciprocity of interpretation” (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 165). It is through language that we communicate meaning, making language the “medium of the hermeneutic experience” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 4). Following Hiedegger’s (1972) proclamation that language is the “house of Being” (p. 65), setting up common language during the interviews, between the co-researchers and researcher, was essential in avoiding misunderstanding.

The aim of the hermeneutic circle is the “fusion of horizons”, a term coined by Gadamer (Ricoeur, 1981, p. 177). As the hermeneutic circle moves in a cyclical manner, the researchers’ prejudices and foreknowledge of the phenomenon moves from pre-understanding to understanding. This is an iterative process that indicates a movement between understanding “parts” of the phenomenon to a gradual realization of its “whole.” In other words, it is a movement from pre-understanding to understanding in which prejudices are revised continually until there is the *fusion of horizons* or a meeting of minds (Rodgers, 2004, p. 149).

The hermeneutic circle secures the validity of the research as it attempts to

solve “the problem of how meaning can be understood objectively – or , as Schleiermacher put it, how to avoid misunderstanding” (Bleicher, 1980, p. 215). When encountering the textual data of this study a hermeneutic engagement was also central to this process. Rich (2004) explains,

understanding involves a process whereby the voice of the one involved in the understanding and the voice of the object to be understood, whether it be narrative, text, or any subject matter, are both heard and involved in an interchange which moves toward a place of shared understanding—the fusion of horizons. (p. 201)

The data analysis followed an interpretive process that allowed for a solid ground of understanding to emerge. This understanding was brought forth from the coalescing of pre-understanding or contextual parts, to a greater understanding of the wholeness of the phenomenon.

### **The Fecundity of the Individual Case**

The final unique feature of the research process, guided by phenomenological-hermeneutics is the fecundity of the individual case. Hermeneutics rejects the perspective of phenomenology that claims a transparency of lived experience. Ricoeur (1983) recognized the impossibility of presenting an all-knowing account of a particular phenomenon. To claim to know a transparent structure of an experience is to propose that it holds a static essence. Hermeneutics asks, what about the uniqueness of lived experience? Not all experience can be demarcated in a clear way, or necessarily fits within one particular mold or thematic schema. Jardine (1990) points out that although human experiences do share similarities, resemblance, and are often analogous, there are



still certain ambiguities that cannot be denied. For this reason the hermeneutic tradition seeks to restore “life to its original difficulty” (Caputo, 1987, p. 1), “a sense of life in which there is always something left to say, with all the difficulty, risk and ambiguity...” (Jardine, 1992a, p. 119). In phenomenological inquiry, lived experience is often sought as a *univocity* of meaning. Husserl (1970) warns that without “phenomenological reduction” there is a “temptation to misunderstand” the meaning of the lived experience (p. 137). If a singularity of voice or a “monological” essence is prioritized to avoid the misunderstanding of lived experience, the uniqueness of the individual case will be lost (Habermas, 1972). Therefore, the hermeneutic methodology recognizes the uniqueness of the individual case.

Honoring the fecundity or uniqueness of the individual case is a central tenet within the hermeneutical approach. It is often in the most unique and exceptional cases of lived experience that the greatest discoveries are made within social science research. The hermeneutic tradition “recognizes that there may be unique fecund instances in the individual stories that need to be addressed” (Nixon, 1992, p. 106). Gadamer (1989) explains the fecundity of the individual case when he writes:

The individual case on which judgment works is never simply a case; it is not exhausted by being a particular example of a universal law or concept. Rather, it is always an “individual case”, and it is significant that we call it a special case, because the rule does not comprehend it. (p. 39)

The individual case must not be overlooked according to the hermeneutic orientation. Although, it may not, as Gadamer suggests, fit into the universal law that we attempt to

clearly define through the analysis, it must still be recognized and presented in the findings.

### **Transpersonal Phenomenology**

*Transpersonal* explicitly refers to the levels of consciousness beyond the ego-self. The developmental levels of transpersonal consciousness are marked by the transcendence of the ego-self and an embracement of Self as it exists beyond finite personal consciousness. Transpersonal consciousness is described as infinite, ever-present and eternal. In the Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization, the *nondual* refers explicitly to the complete dissolve of polarized entities (dualisms) and an emergence of unity and oneness within one's being. The Sufis explain the nondual experience as the uniting of the lover and Beloved. In ego consciousness there is a subject conscious of an "I" or a "me." Everything in relation to the "I" or "me" is the object, or the other. The subject-object split completely vanishes in nondual experience. Consciousness is not conscious of anything, but rather all things. Consciousness is transformed from a consciousness of something into a consciousness of everything including itself without any ontological distinctions.

Wilber (1979) describes consciousness at this level as a consciousness without boundary, or of "no boundary." In this no-boundary experience there is an expansion and fullness in the moment, and an apprehension of infinite space. This moment is highly transformational, in which the self-structures dissolve and an expanded nature of Self emerges. Valle (1998) describes these moments as "a loss of awareness of [one's] body sense as a thing or spatial container" (p. 276). Many of the old self-concepts and self-conscious or limited attitudes of the self fall away in this moment. For this reason many

transpersonal psychologists perceive the therapeutic potential that “nonordinary” consciousness has in facilitating human growth, development and wholeness (Pressman, 1992).

The philosophical orientation provided by transpersonal phenomenology corresponds to the mode of knowing that is apprehended in human states experienced beyond ego consciousness, as described above. Transpersonal or transcendent inquiry corresponds to Wilber’s (1996) mode of knowing through the eye of contemplation that must be transferred or conveyed through the eye of mind. Transpersonal phenomenology requires the researcher to engage in a delicate interplay between the eye of contemplation and the eye of mind. In this way producing the thematic analysis of the lived experience as a framework or a narrative building pointing to a more profound transpersonal understanding (Solowoniuk & Nixon, 2009). Valle (1998) describes transpersonal awareness to be prior to both pre-reflective and reflective levels of awareness. It is, in Valle’s words described as a “unitive space from within which intentional consciousness and phenomenal experience both manifest” (p. 276). Solowoniuk and Nixon (2009) introduce a research procedure that explicates the nature of transpersonal awareness. They have outlined this research procedure as having the following four stages:

- i. Dwelling and beholding: an intuitive process that occurs in part during the interview process and when scanning the narrative data repeatedly. The researcher is intuitively guided towards capturing (beholding) particular subjective states that clearly articulate the noumenal essence of the co-researcher’s experience. The words, sentences and paragraphs are lifted off

the page as they illuminate a theme under question and point to a transpersonal understanding.

- ii. Noetic reduction: refers to a mirroring of perception that is not ego-bound because the researcher is investigating consciousness *itself* apart from intentionality. It directs the researcher to reflect on the narrative data in light of absolute consciousness and then upon how form arises to create self. In other words, how inner experience becomes outer experience. Essentially the researcher is observing how the formless becomes form and how it shapes the experience of our “I” consciousness in light of returning to the world of non-duality. Noetic reduction is a careful process of trying to remain aware of the absolute field of consciousness while moving into discriminating forms, ideas, and concepts of thought. In this process the researcher must try not to cloud the transpersonal or direct mystical felt sense of pure consciousness through conceptual interpretation. Employing noetic reduction and discerning concepts leads to noumenal parsing.
- iii. Noumenal parsing: activates the eye of mind. The phenomenological-hermeneutic methods motivate the researcher to organize, configure and illuminate the essence of the co-researcher’s experience.
- iv. Intuitive recognition: is a meditation that requires a letting go of all intellectual musings. The researcher begins to sense a reality beyond words that were been employed to capture the co-researcher’s inner and outer experiences. Therefore, the researcher has stood back from their

conceptualized horizons and has allowed the direct experience of the truth of the phenomenon to emerge. This constitutes intuitive recognition. (pp. 4-5)

The methodology of transpersonal phenomenology outlined in these four basic steps is essential to this study as it supports the research into transpersonal awareness. The philosophical orientation that transpersonal phenomenology provides for this study honors the intuitive inquiry into the co-researcher's transcendent experiences.

## **Research Design**

### *Access to the Halveti-Jerrahi Sufi Community*

The Halveti-Jerrahi Sufi community is a public Sufi Order (*Tariqa*) and a non-profit organization known for welcoming and embracing all people. It not only promotes the advancement of spiritual and religious knowledge, but is also a social relief organization involved in a number of humanitarian projects. Although the Sufi order is of Turkish origin, the diverse and heterogeneous demographic of its practitioners is apparent. This order has attracted a broad mix of individuals who are culturally and ethnically diverse and of differing socio-economic, educational and religious backgrounds (though most are Muslim). Access to this community was established through speaking directly to the main representative and Sheikh, the spiritual guide of the community, Sheikh Tevfik Aydoner. The Sheikh kindly agreed to allow a flyer to be posted on the announcement board of their Sufi lodge, which briefly described the nature of the study and extended an invitation to contact me directly by telephone or email (See Appendix A). An email was also sent to the community email list serve, sharing information about this study to its members (See Appendix B).

### ***Inclusion Criteria for Co-researcher Selection***

For this study it was decided that at least five Sufi practitioners, who meet the inclusion criteria, should be selected to participate in this research project. The selection of the co-researchers was based upon a set of criteria. I considered the importance of saturation in the research process as an indication that a substantive amount of material had been collected. Morse (1994) determines “indices of saturation” to be when there is a “repetition in the information obtained and confirmation of previously collected data” (Morse, 1994, p. 230). Interviews from five co-researchers generated enough data to reach saturation, or the repetition of themes.

Many of the recommendations made by Colaizzi (1978) were considered in the development of this criterion. The following is the list of inclusion criteria that was used in the selection of the five co-researchers:

- i. They have been engaged in Sufi practice continuously for the last 5 years.
- ii. They have had an experience of the nondual “Universal consciousness” under study, otherwise known in Sufi terms as *fana*, annihilation of the ego and *baqa* subsistence in pure Divine consciousness.
- iii. They have the capacity to clearly and accurately verbalize thoughts and images related to their Sufi journey and experiences of Unitive consciousness, and finally
- iv. They are enthusiastic about their engagement in this proposed study as a co-researcher.

Once the prospective co-researcher met the inclusion criteria, and understood the commitment of participating in this study, a face-to-face digitally recorded interview was held.

## **Interview Procedure**

A dramaturgical interviewing method was used to capture the mythic-mystical journeys of the five co-researchers. This narrative aspect was used to apprehend the beginning, middle and end phases of the co-researchers' journeys. The aim of dramaturgical interviewing is to construct a common story that reflects the individual stories of people who have experienced this phenomenon (Cochran & Claspell, 1987). The dramaturgical aspect, as elucidated in Cochran's (1985, 1986) works, was used to elicit a narrative description of the personal stories of the five co-researchers journeys in Sufism.

Two interviews took place in this study. The first interview was a face-to-face digitally recorded interview and an in-depth account of the co-researchers experience in Sufism. This interview lasted between three and five hours depending on the time needed for the co-researcher to elucidate his or her journey. The interview was transcribed verbatim, and the text of the conversation was used as the main source of analysis. The location of the interview was mutually agreed upon and ensured the privacy, confidentiality and comfort of the co-researcher. The interview began with the researcher describing her role in the study, which was to provide a venue or platform for which the co-researcher's voice could be heard and their stories be told. To this point Rich (2004) writes that the co-researchers "were considered [the] voices of dialogue that in conversation with the researcher gave the topic itself a voice" (p. 237).

In keeping with the dramaturgical method, the researcher began the interview by asking the co-researchers to share the very beginnings of their journey. To explore some of the turning points that led them to choose a Sufi path and to elaborate on what incited this need for seeking. The middle of their stories consisted of all the layers of experiences

they have had, and insights and epiphanies encountered along the way. By using open-ended and clarifying questions, summarizing and paraphrasing the researcher was able to create an environment that allowed for comprehensive narratives of the co-researchers' experiences to be shared. This style of interviewing reflects the Rogerian (1961) person-centered counseling technique. Roger (1961) presents person-centered counseling as a relationship built upon principles of equality, respect, and growth. The use of empathic reflection of emotion and meaning, as well as a non-judgmental and non-threatening approach to counseling helped to support the co-researchers in their honest and authentic sharing. Prior to the in-person interview the researcher communicated to the co-researchers that they could bring to the interview images, drawings, poetry or other forms of expression. This was to be used during the interview to facilitate the sharing of poignant and profound moments in their journey.

A second interview took place after the transcripts were read through and analyzed by the researcher. The preliminary themes and unique or fecund aspects of the co-researchers' journeys were discussed in the second interview. This allowed for a process of mutual analysis and interpretation to take place during the interview. The interview was conducted over the phone and lasted between one and two hours. It was also digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. During the second interviews deeper meanings emerged for the co-researchers as they listened and responded to my interpretations. These interviews allowed for a finalization of the emergent themes in the study.

### **Scientific Rigor and Trustworthiness**

The scientific rigor of a study is traditionally measured in terms of its reliability and validity. In qualitative research the reliability and validity are often gauged in terms of



the studies trustworthiness. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) trustworthiness is dependent on how well the research findings are supported by the data collected. Lincoln and Guba (1985) make specific reference to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability as components of trustworthiness. These four subsets of scientific rigor relate to measures of internal and external validity as well as reliability and replicability.

The first measure of scientific rigor is credibility. This measure relates to internal validity, and within this work constitutes an inter-subjective agreement over the research findings between the researcher and the co-researchers. Lincoln and Guba (1985) recognize the concept of *member checking* as supporting credibility, as it allows the co-researchers to substantiate the researchers interpretation of the data (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). This was achieved by holding a second interview in which the co-researchers and the researcher entered into a conversation about the preliminary themes of the study. This dialogical exchange allowed the co-researchers to confirm and/or challenge the emergent themes presented to them. Through this process the themes were refined to best reflect the lived realities of the co-researcher's experiences in Sufism.

By holding the second interviews an additional measure of trustworthiness called confirmability was enhanced. Traditionally confirmability is related to replicability, and in this context refers to how sound the inferences are made by the researcher. In this case the researcher could not be swayed by "personal values" or "theoretical inclinations" (Bryman & Teevan, 2005) during her analysis, as the final themes were corroborated with the co-researchers. This safeguarded the authenticity of the study.

The third measure of trustworthiness is dependability, which parallels reliability. The measure of reliability, of ensuring the findings will remain consistent overtime, is

problematic for qualitative research. The ontological position of the qualitative paradigm understands the social world to be constantly changing; it is always being constructed, therefore the findings do not necessarily hold over time (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). In place of reliability is dependability, which refers to how well the data supports the findings. Following Morse (1994), the recurring themes and patterns that emerged in the data points to an adequacy of the data. This is also termed theme saturation, which is recognized as supporting trustworthiness (Morse, 1994).

### *Conferring of Validity*

External validity, also known as transferability, is the conferring of validity beyond the co-researchers in a study. The measure of external validity is traditionally understood as generalizability. This understanding is also fundamentally problematic for qualitative inquiry as the findings are specific to particular populations and settings (Bryman & Teevan, 2005). Transferability refers to the extent that the interpretations of the phenomenon studied will resonate with the experience of others who have encountered the same phenomenon (Shapiro, 1986). For this reason external validity is often considered to be impossible to guarantee in advance, as it is not something that can be pre-established in a phenomenological hermeneutic study. Nixon (1992) explains,

the validity of this research cannot be demonstrated by pulling back to an objective methodological analysis but instead it can be seen by looking forward to what comes of this research. The reader has to decide how valid this research is from the themes that emerge and how they implicate the reader as well. Thus, it is only through this public sharing of this research that the “validity” of this research

can be worked out. This gives this research an air of humility and helplessness because the validity of this research cannot be guaranteed in advance. (p. 108)

Although conferring the validity of this study beyond the co-researchers' involvement cannot be worked out in advance, "thick description" (Geertz, 1993, p. 5) can ensure the transferability of the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) the term "thick description" denotes "sufficient information about the context in which an inquiry is carried out so that anyone else interested in transferability has a base of information appropriate to the judgment" (p. 124). In this study a thick description of the data was achieved by performing a close and sensitive reading of the transcripts and an elaborate detailing of the findings. Detailed elaboration of the findings that are presented in an exhaustive, comprehensive and "thick" descriptive manner will enhance transferability (Sandelowski, 1986).

### ***Triangulation***

Another measure of trustworthiness that has enhanced the scientific rigor of this study is triangulation of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation involves using multiple data sources in an investigation to produce understanding (Denzin, 1978). In this study the triangulation constituted using multiple theoretical perspectives and conceptual frameworks to examine and interpret the data. The blend of methodologies as well as the dramaturgical narrative aspect allowed the researcher to approach the data from multiple perspectives. This triangulation supported the in-depth and well-rounded interpretive analysis presented in the research findings. As well, the inclusion of some poetry by the co-researchers provided an additional source of data to draw from.

This section has outlined, in clear and detailed description, the research

procedure of this study, from access to the community, recruitment strategies, inclusion criteria, and the interviewing procedure. In the way, the dependability of this study has been worked out. The use of member checking, thick description, saturation and triangulation are all techniques and levels of measurement that have ensured an accurate representation of the lived experience of the co-researchers in this study, and will therefore enhance the trustworthiness of this study.

### **Research Limitations**

The co-researchers in this study were selected from the *Halveti-Jerrahi* Sufi order located in Toronto, Ontario. Several branches of this order exist in North America and other parts of the world, however the Toronto community is the official Canadian branch. Sufi schools and communities belonging to a range of Sufi orders exist in North America, such as the *Darqawi*, *Naqshabandi*, *Qadiri*, *Rifa'i*, *Mevlevi*, *Shadhili* and *Nimatullahi* lineages. These Sufi orders do not differ in their underlying philosophical or theological assumptions, even though they might differ in their meditative methods and techniques. A particular collection of litanies and prayers might also be regularly recited and unique to each community. These litanies and prayers are called *awrad* and are taught by each of the enlightened sages of the Sufi order and passed on through succession. Each Sufi order has a living master or spiritual guide who is responsible for providing spiritual guidance to his or her community.

The small number of co-researchers that were selected from one *Halveti-Jerrahi* branch may limit the research findings, at the same time though, it has allowed the research to be more focused. As noted, the depictions of the Sufi journey captured in this study are representative of the small number of co-researchers recruited from one

Sufi community. Given the contingences of time and the scope of this work, being a master's thesis, I understand this small sample size to be appropriate for the nature of this study. Furthermore, this limitation did not prevent universal themes and meanings to emerge from among the co-researchers stories, whose profound and mystical experiences were confirmed within the literature of Sufism. In other words the co-researchers' experiences resonate with the accounts in the Sufi tradition spanning over fourteen thousand years.

Another possible limitation of this study relates to the accuracy of the co-researcher's retelling of their Sufi journeys and nondual experiences. At the time of the interview it might be days, weeks, months or possibly even years since they experienced these poignant experiences. Therefore, significant variables should be considered that might have impacted the relaying of actual depictions. For instance, the co-researcher's ability to remember the experience and to reflect upon it without modifying it, is one variable to consider. This issue relates to whether the truth of the experience was represented in the co-researchers' self-reports and whether aspects of their experience will be remembered selectively. Nonetheless, factual information is not necessarily of utmost concern within a study of this kind, rather, the meanings and effects of the experiences are preferred.

Lastly, limitations related to the reliability of the data will be addressed. The methodology of this study, notably the hermeneutic and transpersonal aspects of this methodology, stress the position of the researcher as implicated in the study. In this way, the research is fully engaged in "conversation" with co-researchers in a process of coming to a mutual understanding their experiences. Biases and subjective orientations

are not “bracketed out” as they would be in a strictly phenomenological study. For this reason, the caution as an implicated researcher will be to consciously avoid inferring or supplanting one’s own meanings upon the co-researchers’ experiences or otherwise attempting to fit their experiences into a set mold. This potential limitation was avoided by holding a second interview with the co-researchers in which there was a corroboration of the findings.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

In compliance with the Tri-Counsel guidelines for ethical standards, a research proposal was submitted for review to the Ethical Review Committee for Human Subjects at the University of Lethbridge. The research proposal was approved prior to commencing the research component of this study. The research proposal included the written consent form that was distributed to the co-researchers and signed before their participation in this study (see Appendix C). The consent form used by Nixon (1992) in his dissertation was used as a model. The basic points from Nixon’s (1992) consent form were modified and expanded on to fit the research project of this study. The consent form includes:

- i. the purpose of the research and the methodology used in the study,
- ii. the time commitments and responsibilities required of the co-researchers during their participation in the study,
- iii. the voluntary nature of the study and,
- iv. the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or negative consequence, as well as the right of the researcher to terminate their involvement if necessary.

The primary ethical consideration of this study was to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the co-researchers during their involvement. This was done, in part, by assigning co-researchers with a self-selected pseudonym. In addition, the interviews were held in a private location that safeguarded their confidentiality. The researcher was the only person with access to the transcripts besides Dr. Gary Nixon, the research supervisor. The co-researchers were offered a copy of their transcripts in order to change or delete any identifying information. The digital recordings from the first and second interviews were destroyed after the transcripts were completed. Finally, the co-researcher's transcripts will be kept for five years in a locked filing cabinet, at which time they will be destroyed. By following these steps I hope to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and to adhere to the ethical standards required for this study.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has discussed the research methodology and procedures that were used to investigate the lived experience of Sufi practitioners in their journey towards nondual Self-realization. The methodologies presented in this chapter, namely, phenomenological-hermeneutics and transpersonal-phenomenology, provided the underlying philosophical orientation for this research. They have allowed me to draw out exhaustive and comprehensive results that are presented in chapter four. This chapter has addressed the research procedure, as well as the dramaturgical aspect and the interview process. The recruitment and selection of the co-researchers, as well as issues of scientific rigor and trustworthiness, possible research limitations, and questions pertaining to ethical standards were reviewed.

## Chapter IV – The Grand Narrative of the Sufi Journey in Eight Themes

### Introduction

Stop the flow of your words. Open the window of your heart and let the Spirit speak.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi The Sufi Path of Love

In this chapter the research findings are presented in eight themes that capture the co-researchers' lived experience in Sufism. The themes represent progressive stages in the Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization. Each theme marks a particular developmental shift or threshold that is passed as they move towards greater awareness. In order to move through each threshold the co-researchers surrender to the transformative shift offered at each stage in their respective journeys. Through their surrender they allow for an expansion of consciousness that facilitates their psycho-spiritual development. This journey sees the co-researchers through the healing of pre-egoic splits, shadow aspects and restricted self-concepts. It tracks the integration and development of healthy ego consciousness, and then to greater realization in transcendent states. This chapter opens with an introduction to each of the five co-researchers. They are: Waliye, Janan, Rashid, Nuriyana and Fouad. A brief overview of their particular life context is shared, and the significance of their self-selected pseudonym is given.

### The Five Co-researchers

#### *Waliye*

Waliye is a devoted husband, father and grandfather who has been passionately traversing the Sufi path for over 30 years. Waliye was born in the Netherlands to a moderately practicing Christian family. From a young age Waliye became very curious about his own mortality, yet was not comfortable with adopting the beliefs and



understandings of the church on this matter. His inquiry into the existence of God and an afterlife led him down many avenues in his search for answers. He spent much time dabbling in the occult traditions, learning astral travel and was at one point experimenting with hallucinogenic substances. A series of very fortuitous events led him to the Sufi tradition.

Within the Jerrahi Sufi order he is considered an advanced dervish and has acted as a teacher and guide for novice dervishes. For Waliye and his wife, being in the service of those in need is the highest spiritual practice one can have. Waliye and his wife have been active in their community running humanitarian initiatives, such as soup kitchens and various programs for the homeless. Currently Waliye holds a weekly drumming circle and offers mentorship for at-risk youth.

The name Waliye comes from the Arabic *wali*, which means “Friend of God” and may also be translated as “saint.” The *wali* has tremendous significance within Sufism. As Rumi remarks, “everyone has turned his face toward some direction, but the saint has turned in the direction without directions” (Chittick, 1983, p. 21). What this means is that the saint has transcended the world of forms and his perception resides in and through the Eye of God alone. The veils of illusion, ignorance and deception have all lifted, and his perception is clear and undefiled. The saint is able to see things as they truly are, and act effortlessly with a pure and wise discernment of Truth. For Rumi the saint has realized their innermost consciousness. He continues by adding, “the saint has died to himself and becomes living through the Lord; hence God’s mysteries are upon his lips” (Chittick, 1983, p. 185).

## *Janan*

Janan has lived her life inspired by music and sacred sound. Born into a Canadian Jewish household, she describes being raised as a ‘secular humanist’ and never strongly identified with her Jewish heritage. She was a child performer and actor and therefore experienced tremendous expectation for achievement from those around her. She was trained in Opera at Juilliard and then at the Glyndebourne festival opera in England. In her mid twenties she was performing in some of the most renowned productions in Germany, and all of the major symphonies and orchestras in Europe and North America.

At the age of 28 she became very ill and retired from her busy life as a successful opera singer. Following the recovery of her illness she spent ten years without singing or performing. She describes this decade of her life as a time of silence in which she was “exploring the sound of silence.” In the silence she was primarily called to explore the mind-body connection through yoga practices and meditation. She travelled to Nepal for three years and studied with a Tibetan Buddhist Monk. Over a decade ago she became connected to the Jerrahi Sufi community, her first exposure came from her travels in Turkey and later on she forged a connection with the community in Toronto. Janan and her husband perform sacred Sufi music called *Ilahis* at multi-faith gatherings, for small church ceremonies and many special events where sacred sound is being honoured.

Janan is a spiritual mother to many young seekers and newcomers to the Sufi community. For many she is a respected Sheikha, a female Sufi teacher who offers guidance to those who approach her for direction. The name Janan is a Turkish variation of the Persian *Jan*, which means spirit, and also life. This is because Spirit is what animates the body and brings it to life. For Janan the name signifies living her life through Spirit and in Truth.

### ***Rashid***

Rashid is a 34 year-old husband and father. He is of Prussian heritage and was raised in a devout Christian household. At age 17 Rashid became terribly disturbed when he realized a family friend was a neo-Nazi. He broke away in revolt against his family, his pastor and others who were not willing to cut out this man from their lives. It was at this time that Rashid decided to volunteer with Canada World Youth, and traveled abroad to Africa where he was positioned in Burkina Faso for one year. One evening Rashid heard the recitation of the Qur'an by a young boy in his village. He felt this was a pivotal experience in which a seed was planted that eventually drew him to Sufism.

Upon returning to Canada he spent a few years experimenting with LSD, and experienced what he described as an experience of “non-being” during one of his acid trips. He recalls slipping into a dimension of non-existence, a vast space of nothingness in which he felt completely surrendered to and suspended within.

Rashid has been affiliated with the Jerrahi Sufi community for almost 10 years, he believes strongly in taking care of the environment and serving the human family. The meaning of Rashid comes from the Arabic for “rightly guided.” From a young age Rashid has had a strong sense of justice and has felt the responsibility of following Truth, despite the resistance of those around him. A testament to this has been the mindfulness he has in the service to humanitarian and environmental causes.

### ***Nuriyana***

Nuriyana is a 37-year old scholar of political science who was raised in a traditional Muslim home. Around the age of 11 she started to question the beliefs, rituals and traditions that she had, for so many years, passively accepted. After many years of

studying gender, politics and religion, engaging in volunteerism and travelling abroad, she found her home in the mystical path of Sufism. She found the path, *tariqa*, provided the tools and the sanctity, which would facilitate the direct experiential knowing of Truth she had so desired.

Much of Nuriyana's journey has been centered on deconstructing and undoing the deeply entrenched intellectual study of ideologies related to politics and modernization. The greatest shift for Nuriyana came through the realization that the ideologies she upheld were merely small, fragmented, and disconnected aspects of understanding that were masking Truth. She has since been able to unravel these veils and soak in what she considers the luminous clarity of the Absolute.

The Name Nuriyana has its roots in the Arabic for Divine Light, Al-Nur. "The Light" is one of the 99 Divine names within the Islamic pantheon of names and attributes ascribed to the Absolute. In the radiance of Divine Light Truth is revealed and the path of realization is illuminated. Divine Light is symbolic of knowledge of the innermost self, and the ability to look beyond the appearance of things including the limitations of one's own egocentricity. In Nuriyana's journey, breaking down the walls of ideology and falsehood were integral to the unveiling of her illuminated understanding of the world. It also mirrored the discovery of her innermost reality, which she calls her Center.

### ***Fouad***

Fouad is the son of academically trained Christian missionaries. Growing up he spent many years traveling and living in the Far East. It was not until he was a teenager that his family returned to Canada in time for him to start high school. Fouad experienced difficulty settling into the Canadian lifestyle and fitting in with his peers. For this reason

he often felt alienated and isolated from those around him. This sense of isolation increased as he began to turn away from the religion of his birth putting a wedge between himself and his family, and causing considerable tension in his home life.

In his last year of high school his parents decided to resume their missionary work abroad, and he choose to stay behind and live on his own. It was during this time that Fouad explored many philosophical and religious ideas from Nietzsche to St. Augustine, seeking for something to resonate with his innermost self. One afternoon while reading the poetry of a medieval Sufi saint, Jalal ad-Din Rumi, his heart was stirred, and he felt called to seek out the Sufi path. He eventually found a spiritual home with the Jerrahi Sufi community, and has been a devout practitioner for over 10 years.

The name Fouad is Arabic for “heart.” In this case, the *fouad* refers to the spiritual and not the physical heart. In Sufism the heart is metaphorically understood as the sacred meeting place between the human and Divine reality. When the spiritual heart is cleansed and polished it becomes a receptacle for Truth and acts as a compass to guide one in the direction of Ultimate Realization.

### **Awakening the Eye of the Heart: A Painful Opening to Self-Inquiry**

I saw my Lord with the eye of the heart  
I asked, “Who are You?” He replied, “You”

Mansur al-Hallaj, Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam

The Sufi journey towards nondual Self-realization may be summarized as the journey towards the innermost heart. In this context the heart is not the anatomical heart but the spiritual center of the human being, which is figuratively or symbolically called “the heart.” Much of Sufi discourse and methodology is centered on cleansing the heart through various forms of prayer and meditation. Quite literally the spiritual heart is the

*heart* of this path and the isthmus between human and Divine consciousness. The spiritual heart is where one meets God and unites with the Beloved.

In Sufism the heart is the spiritual organ of apprehension, the seat of Rumi's "Universal Intellect" or Wilber's eye of Spirit. It is only through the eye of the heart that the eternal mystery, the Divine, may be uncovered and witnessed in its totality, as the 9<sup>th</sup> century saint, Hallaj so aptly described. The Sufis believe that human consciousness is a manifestation of a single Consciousness like rays of the sun, and that the heart is the locus of this singular Consciousness.<sup>5</sup> Manifest existence (form) and non-manifest existence (formlessness) meet at this juncture of the heart. It is here that the earth and the cosmos are integrated and united. Sheikh Hazin Lahiji, a 17th century Sufi saint writes, "the heart is the treasury in which God's mysteries are stored; seek the purpose of both the worlds through the heart, for that is the point of it (Faidman & Frager, 1999, p. 104). It is through one's heart center that nondual Self-realization occurs, as all opposites and dualities fuse at its pith. For Christians one may understand the spiritual heart to contain the Holy Spirit. For instance, in Roman Catholicism the sacred heart is depicted as a chalice that receives the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit reveals Ultimate Truth to the heart. In the Qur'an the Holy Spirit, *Ruh al-qudus*, is used in reference to the Angel Gabriel, as it was the Angel who delivered the messages of God to the realized prophets and saints. It is through the spiritual heart that the eternal appears immanent and provides a link between this world and the next, for those who can perceive it. In this way, the spiritual heart is the Center through which one accesses the guidance that comes from pure Spirit.

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<sup>5</sup> When referring to this singular consciousness the following terms may be used: the Divine, the Divine reality, the Real, the Center, the Absolute, Truth, God or the Arabic for God, Allah. These terms are used interchangeably, as they are not conceptually different but only indicate semantic distinctions.

In turning to this study, it is not surprising that the initial stage in the Sufi journey captures an awakening of this spiritual heart. The co-researchers' voices speak clearly about the nature of this first theme, as an awakening of their spiritual heart which is a painful and turbulent opening to self-inquiry. For many of the co-researchers this self-inquiry opens up during the depths of their pain, whether brought on by illness, tragedy or deep depressive states. It seems that in the midst of their toil and anxiety their spiritual heart breaks open, awakens and invigorates their spiritual eye. The eye of the heart may also be understood through Ken Wilber's discourse on the three eyes. In this case the eye of the heart is the eye of *transcendilia* that relays and relates to intuitive and transcendent states of consciousness and is the gateway for Ultimate Realization.

According to the Sufis, the reality of the heart is indestructible and indivisible. Waliye claims that the essence found within the heart is the same in all forms of existence. He explains the centrality of the heart within the Sufi tradition as the gateway for Ultimate Realization as follows,

Realization is expressed in Sufi terms as being through the heart, but this is the mystic's heart, the spiritual heart, its not the organ that keeps the blood going, it's not the old pump, so where is it? I think it is within the soul but within all of the souls at the same time, if you were to split the souls into atoms I think each atom would have a heart, and if you were to split the atoms into molecules each molecule would have a heart and so on and so on. It's indivisible.

The description of the spiritual heart as an indivisible *essence* echoes the understanding of reality espoused by David Bohm & Karl Pilbram, in their explanation of the holographic universe (Talbot, 1992). Bohm's study into subatomic particles found that

reality is like a hologram, which means quite literally what William Blake proposed, which is that “you can find the universe in a grain of sand.” The entire substance of the universe is contained in the smallest sub-atomic particles. A similar metaphor can be found in the Buddhist tradition, in their understanding of Indra’s Net. Indra’s Net contains an infinite number of jewels. In each mesh of the net there is a jewel, and each jewel contains every other jewel in this net. This metaphor, much like the paradigm of the holographic universe, evokes an understanding that *essence* is everything and everything is this very essence. In Waliye’s experience he has come to understand the spiritual heart to have an indestructible essence, and it is precisely this essence that sustains all things.

In reference to Wilber’s spectrum of development this stage would indicate the rise of the existential self as it begins to move beyond normal ego consciousness. The existential self confronts its mortality and the inevitability of its own death and might, thereby, experience a state of existential crisis. At this juncture the existential self has the opportunity to dis-identify from the self-concepts and identities of the ego in order to move into expanded states of consciousness (Vaughan, 1985). Therefore, the initial opening to self-inquiry is a movement from physical to spiritual consciousness. The identities and constructs of selfhood that are supported by the ego become insufficient. The seeker yearns to touch what lies beyond the finite realms of their material self and to access the hidden reality of consciousness available in transcendent states. It is through the eye of the heart that one may perceive the subtle realms of intuitive understanding, and realize the inner substance of Selfhood.

Nuriyana, who was born and raised in a Muslim household, recalls her initial break as one that involved her questioning the “religious instruction” of her upbringing.



One winter's evening the magnitude of this break descended upon her, and in an instant an old way of thinking crumbled and a new understanding was born to her. It was the year that a very severe blizzard passed through Toronto. As a child she waited for hours during the storm for the arrival of her father from work. During a time of no cell phones there was no way to know whether he was in danger. For the first time in her life she was confronted with the possibility that a loved one could be in serious danger. Nuryiana recalls the evening as follows,

I was in a state of panic, of anxiety. I felt this heaviness and I started to despair, you know, I thought; oh my God, what if something happens to him? I went upstairs and I remember doing *wudu*<sup>6</sup> perfectly, it had to be the perfect *wudu*, and then I went and I tried to pray the perfect prayer, all of my movements, my recitation, everything was so precise, was to the tea. Then, something broke, I realized the perfect *wudu* and the perfect prayer wasn't going to bring him home, but it was my heart, my heart which was crushed and it was moved by sadness that opened up a prayer in me where I pleaded to God...there was something deep inside of me that awakening, that enlivened, in that moment of sincerity and in that deep deep pain...

It was this experience that led Nuriyana to reflect on the disconnect she felt between the ritualized prayer and the deep-seated calling of her heart, as if these were two distinct aspects. She described these aspects as the “exoteric” and the “esoteric” dimensions of her religion, and was unsure whether they could be reconciled. She reflects, “you pray

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<sup>6</sup> *Wudu* is the Arabic for ablution. The ritual ablution is performed before each of the five ritual prayers and involves cleaning out the mouth, nose, ears, face, arms and feet with water. This signifies the cleansing and purifying of the self and a recommitment not to harm any living being, including oneself, with any of these body parts.

from a very mechanistic and ritualistic place, where is your heart? No one even asks where your heart is in your prayer....” In a moment of deep despair Nuriyana became conscious of a dimension of herself that had not been activated, at least consciously, until this point. Nuriyana reflects back on this point in her life and offers this summary of the shifts that took place within her.

I think what was happening to me in my childhood was I was breaking from, um, a conventional understanding of religion from an exoteric, you know, exteriorized form to something that was deeper and something that was speaking to me in a profound way...

In the initial stage of the journey the co-researchers, like Nuriyana, became aware of the splits or fragmentations within their psyche. At each developmental stage a different developmental split would present itself. Nuriyana has spoken about the perceived exoteric and esoteric dimensions of religious practice that appeared as a dualism between form and Spirit. The transpersonal psychologist Hayward Fox has observed this phenomenon when he writes, “in each developmental stage the self identifies exclusively with one side of a dichotomy and views the other aspect of the dichotomy as alien or separate from self” (1985, p. 92). At this stage Nuriyana is rejecting the exoteric in order to move closer to the esoteric.

For Janan, this fragmentation came in the form of a psychic split between mind and body. It was her devastating illness that highlighted for her this mind-body schism and called her forward to move from a state of disconnection, which may be verbalized as “I have a body” to integrating the psyche/soma split, which is “I am a body.” Human growth and evolution, Fox poignantly observes, “can be understood as integrating the self

back into a larger, more inclusive Whole” (Fox, 1985, p. 92). The physical body is not a shell that exists independent of the inner substance of the human being. Much like the ritualized prayer is not devoid of Spirit. The juxtaposition of body and mind in which the human being is fragmented and compartmentalized is in essence the Cartesian dualism. The fusing of this perceived distinction between outer and inner, form and spirit, exoteric and esoteric is a source of great healing for the co-researchers in their respective journeys.

For Janan, it was at the age of 28 while singing in an Opera house in Germany that the mind-body connection became apparent. For many years she had pushed herself, to live up to the expectations of her early success as a child performer. She was under great physical, emotional and psychological duress. Janan recalls being very disconnected from her body and thus her Spirit, and never did “slow down enough to pay attention to the messages that were being sent [her way].” She felt that this lack of awareness, connection and integration within herself, led to her illness. Consequently, Janan became very sick with a life threatening case of adult chicken pox that she considers was “an invitation to wake up.” She reflects,

I have always sung as a child, um, but it was fraught, ah, because I was a child performer, I had a lot of pressure on me and I found that music was both a place of great solace but also a place of great difficulty and caused me great anxiety... when I was in Germany I got very sick... dangerously ill and it was at that time when I had a terrific sense that so much about this illness was about my whole life and that it was very much about the body-mind connection, which was something that I had never actually put together, although the body is the instrument for

Spirit, I had never actually put that together on such a deep level... so this particular illness turned out to be the first big full stop.

For Janan this 'first big full stop' meant leaving her life in the performance arts and adopting a very different, more inward and reflective lifestyle. Her illness caused her to inquire into the disconnect she felt between physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of herself. It was through contemplating on the source of her illness that she became more conscious of the fragmentation within. This led to a series of transformations that included developing a more coherent and whole self.

As our discussion of her illness continued we unraveled deeper and deeper layers of significance related to her experience. In this next passage Janan recalls the fear of losing her identity, which was the sense of who she was in the world, as a result of the illness she suffered.

It was a vehement case, just vehement, and I had huge running sores out of every pore in my body, except for the palms of my hands and the soles of my feet. I had them in my mouth, my hair, my skin, huge oozing painful running sores. I, not only was in agony, I really thought I would never be recognizable again, that I would lose my face, my identity, I thought the scarring would be close to small pox and um, it was this terrible... this sense that the inside was coming out and that was the signal that I felt I had to go inside and find all of what that was, that was oozing out of me, in such a virile destructive way. So it was very significant from a symbolic point of view. I was also on the verge of sort of losing my identity of how I looked in the world. I knew intuitively that it was completely linked to singing for the very reason that there was

terrific comfort and ambivalence around the overachievement, um, the stress of studying and practice, the pressure of performing, all of those things and I had a great deal of identification with my singing as an operative vehicle, and yet at the same time I knew it was my pipeline to this other thing that I couldn't really even name at that time.

Janan's illness was a turning point in her life. It was an opening for a much needed pause, and an opportunity to gain more self-awareness. It was also a spiritual awakening as she was called to explore aspects of herself that she had been cut off from, including the idea that she was an instrument for Spirit. Her fear of losing her identity was also a significant concern for her. Who was she really, beyond the status and fame that she had acquired as an opera performer? Through the awakening of the 'eye' of her heart she began to listen to her voice with greater consciousness of it being connected to something much greater than her self.

For Rashid, his awakening, and subsequently his opening to self-inquiry came through a very troubling circumstance he found himself in as a teenager. Rashid, who was a fairly devout Christian, experienced a crisis of faith and a breakdown within his family when his parents developed a relationship with a man who had neo-Nazi sentiments. Rashid recalls his devastation in the following passage,

The turning point came when I was about seventeen, um, and my father had a friend who was a neo-Nazi. And he'd come to our house to make his calls, because maybe it was safe at our house, and he would eat our food, and there was a point where I started to challenge his views and he called me "idiot" and "stupid" and my parent's didn't react to the way he treated me. They didn't take

his side but they were like neutral passive observers in their own house and that triggered this family crisis, it was really bad. I was threatening to leave unless he stopped coming over, my request to them was that we close the doors to this, this hateful dark person, who had no intelligence and had no love in his heart, um, and they were like, we're Christians and we have to be tolerant and if we continue to be kind to him he might find Christ and I was like come on, you know, you're in your fifties and sixties mom and dad, you know, don't be so naïve... that really turned me away...

Rashid found the response of passivity, in the face of this “unjust human being”, unbearably heart breaking, and he sank into a deep depression. He had hoped his family, his pastor, and church community would challenge this individual's beliefs or at least make a clear statement against his ways. It was at this time that Rashid left the church and was intent on finding a community that upheld “the principles of truth and justice.” At the height of his depression Rashid recalls his feelings, “I had never felt this kind of depression before ... really it was like there was something running through my body, some kind of, not even necessarily negative energy just this toxicity, it was this incredible anger.” The intense energy that Rashid experienced, in relation to the man he disliked, reflects a struggle with a shadow aspect of his being.

The ‘shadow-persona’ split is caused when one identifies with acceptable aspects of the self and dissociates with the shadow aspects, the undesirable or unacceptable parts. Carl Jung (1960) speaks about the shadow as characteristics in ourselves that we deny, that have been repressed and live in our unconscious mind. Our shadow is often the thing that we have no wish to be. This was definitely the case for Rashid. The man, who for

Rashid represented ugliness, injustice, prejudice and hatred, was merely reflecting the propensity Rashid has for bringing this same dark energy into the world. Sufism teaches that we are not in the world to eradicate the evil outside of us, but to claim responsibility for the evil or harmful aspects within ourselves. We achieve this by bringing to light the dark or uncomfortable aspects of our psyche that might be split off from the self. This *jihad* or inner struggle to reveal aspects that are hidden or undesirable, is the greatest endeavor one could embark on to achieve greater healing for the fragmented psyche.

In the depths of his depression Rashid felt an intense pool of energy coursing through his body. This awareness indicates Rashid becoming more conscious of his lowest tyrannical *nafs*, which contains the shadow aspects. In his discourse on the shadow, Jung (1983) notes “one does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious” (p. 265-266). For Rashid this initial awakening was very much about bringing to his consciousness his own darkness. This proved to be a very painful and uncomfortable process for Rashid, but a natural step in the awakening process. Shadow aspects will continue to be explored for the co-researchers in their journeys.

At the young age of 17 Fouad converted to Islam. He then experienced a falling out with his parent’s over religious issues and stayed behind as they resumed their missionary work overseas. During the few years leading up to his conversion he felt very alienated and isolated. He felt he could not relate to his peers and share in their same interests and activities. He also felt tension among his family members as he slowly pulled away from Christianity and the church community. He spent much time alone, reading and studying philosophy. Soon after his parents left the country, Fouad became

homeless. He took refuge in the local mosques as they provided him food and a place to sleep during the evenings. Fouad was taken-in by a very religiously conservative and culturally “traditional” group within the Islamic community called the *tablighi jamaat*.<sup>7</sup> He appreciated the community’s generosity and good will; however he recalls not feeling aligned with the general perspective of the community members. He reflects,

I wasn’t disappointed with the externals of Islam, um, I just kind of felt that it was disappointing because I knew that there were spiritual resources that were deeper than what was being practiced around me, you know, I knew from reading Rumi and Ghazzali, that there was something more to this religion than, you know, what people were talking about and practicing in the mosque, and there was something so dry about the way that these people thought - um, and I really was confident that whatever religion that I had accepted I hadn’t accepted their understanding of it.

It appears that even after his conversion Fouad experienced the same kind of alienation he did from his years in high school and within Christianity. Fouad describes his teenage years as the most painful years of his life, feeling abandoned by his family and isolated from his peers, and now feeling a disconnection with the mosque community. However, in our discussion Fouad noted that in retrospect these experiences were all gifts that propelled him into deeper self-inquiry.

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<sup>7</sup> The *Tablighi Jamaat* is a transnational movement within Islam that has its origins in Northern India. One key feature of this movement is its missionary work within the community. It does not proselytize outside of the group but calls Muslims who may not be as committed to the faith to return to their religious roots. The group invites them to stay at the mosque for retreats in order to resuscitate their religious commitment.



Waliye notes the universality and the necessity of this initial “breakdown”, which Fouad and the others have experienced. He remarks, “Everyone, at some point in their lives at least once has some sort of confrontation, some sort of breakdown that puts them in direct contact with the spiritual...” He continues, “This breakdown is really a breaking open, an awakening if you’d like.” Waliye experienced his initial awakening as a young child. He recalls feeling distraught upon becoming conscious of his own mortality,

I had this massive confrontation with the fact that I was going to die, it freaked me out, I was completely freaked out for months, that’s all I could think about, what that was going to be and that I wasn’t going to exist anymore, so that started me wildly searching for answers...

For Waliye this “massive confrontation” was such a direct and profound hit that it opened his spiritual ‘eye’ and ignited intense contemplation. It appears that for all of the co-researchers this initial awakening has come as an imposition, something they could have never anticipated or would have asked for. All of the experiences seemed to have necessitated great pain, hardship or an intense emotional upheaval. Like Waliye, Nuriyana speaks about the necessity of what she calls the “thunderous blow to the heart”, that for her “awakened a much deeper journey.” It was the only route that would “get her to the gates of God.” She reflects,

My journey to understanding the significance of the heart was captivating, it was a very um, dramatic and traumatic and a quivering journey that required a thunderous break, it required a complete and utter melt down. I used to read that the Sufis would say “oh, sorrow visited you today, how lucky are you” and um,

what struck me is that when sorrow and sadness come to you, you have to go through the depths of sorrow in order to achieve genuine happiness.

For Nuriyana it was in her state of extreme vulnerability and weakness that brought her to the doors of transformation. “It was the worst period of my life and the best period of my life.” She notes, “because on the other side of this journey is complete liberation.”

Similarly Janan speaks about the necessity of “these cataclysmic things” that come into our life to propel us into greater and more expansive states.

Well I think like all of these things, the thing that devastates you calls for a great turning on the road, you know, it’s a crossroads, change will occur and perspectives need to be shifted and so I think that great events do that, these cataclysmic things that happen to us do that, pain will give you the grace, and of course the sense of the broken heart is about making it bigger so it can hold more, encompass more, so this is a very high turning point.

Sufism teaches that pain is an invitation to greater understanding, if it is used as a point of contemplation. The Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran (2000) may have articulated this truth best when he declared, “Your pain is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding” (p. 52). In this case the shell represents what is most apparent, the material physical reality - what Wilber would call the realm of *sensibilia*. Pain can have an alchemical effect of helping to break open the outer crust, the shell, to allow the eye of the heart to become awakened. This eye inspires a new understanding on the nature of the self and the world. Rumi speaks metaphorically about the body as being pregnant with Spirit. “Pain is necessary”, he writes, “for it will open a way for the child.” In other words, just as a mother suffers the pain of childbirth so that “the embryo may break out

of its prison” (Chittick, 1983, p. 184), so too does the human being suffer in order to create an opening for the birth of their Spiritual self. In the words of Nuriyana, “the journey to awaken the heart is nothing short of a spiritual awakening, it is nothing short of a spiritual journey, it’s the path of the mystic and there’s no other door to take you there, none.”

In this initial stage of the Sufi journey the door of spiritual awakening has been opened. This theme may be summarized as a painful break that awakens the eye of the heart and incites the co-researchers to deeper self-inquiry. The cataclysmic events surrounding this initial stage demonstrate the alchemical quality of pain. It has propelled each of the co-researchers to question their perceptions of themselves and their world and calls them to seek a new understanding. It seems that this spiritual journey has its beginnings in the very fragile and tumultuous events that invite one to awaken. It is an opening that illuminates the splits within the fragmented psyche of each of the co-researchers and ignites, in them, a search for healing and wholeness.

### **The Dance of the Seeker: Tasting the Many ‘Wines’**

O seeker, know that the path to truth is within you...there is no arriving or leaving...who seeks and finds when there is none but God?

Sheikh Badruddin, The Essential Sufism

Sheikh Badruddin’s words imply that the act of seeking is in itself an illusion. Since the inward reality of the human being encompasses the Divine mystery in its totality, what is there to seek that is not already present and accessible right here and now?

The Sufis recognize the paradox of the seeker and yet consider it a necessary stage in the wayfarer’s journey. A 13<sup>th</sup> century saint Bayazid Bastami, makes note of this

when he writes, “the things we tell of can never be found by seeking, yet only seekers find” (Chittick, 1983, p. 37). In Sufi literature one may find plenty of parables that offer advice for the one who embarks on this paradoxical journey. In Sufism the seeker, the *salik*, is one who is being led to the doorstep of transformation through their very own substance. Their inner substance wants to be known, yearns to be brought out into the world and illuminated. This yearning calls the seeker towards his or her path of self-discovery.

There are many pitfalls that the seeker may experience on this often ambiguous and treacherous phase in their journey, aptly called the “dance of the seeker.” For instance some *saliks* travel far and wide for answers from enlightened teachers in distant lands. Other *saliks* tour spiritual communities looking for a new identity and community to settle into. For a period of time the seeker may have grandiose ideas about having a ‘spiritual’ identity. Therefore, rather than going beyond and transcending the ego, one is simply reinforcing unhealthy ego states by adopting a new set of self-concepts. The inherent problem with this new constructed self is that it too is built on external identifications, titles and labels that reinforce the ego and lead to a narcissistic and materialistic identity. This particular pitfall on the seeker’s journey may be identified as “spiritual materialism.”

The reference used in the title of this theme, “Tasting the Many ‘Wines’”, comes from one of Rumi’s poems about the different kinds of consciousness altering substances that may be used in the quest for Self-realization. In his poem, The Many Wines, Jalal ad-Din Rumi warns about the temporary states one may experience in their use of different ‘wines.’ He remarks that there are many ‘wines’ that may facilitate some

incredible states of consciousness, however these states are transitory and cannot be sustained. The individual may experience a great high only to fall back into their ordinary, and pre-existing consciousness. This flux takes its toll on the psyche and may create a very destabilizing, almost bipolar effect. The vacillating states could be detrimental for the individual and induce greater suffering.

Rumi urges the seeker to choose a 'wine' that has a sustained outcome, and that gradually moves the individual to greater states of consciousness through a careful and methodical process. The following is an excerpt from Rumi's poem, The Many Wines. He writes, "God has given us a dark wine so potent that, drinking it, we leave the two worlds" (Barks, 1997, p. 6). He explains, "God has put into the form of hashish a power to deliver the taster from self-consciousness... there are thousands of wines that can take over our minds. Don't think all ecstasies are the same!" (Barks, 1997, p. 6). After his discussion of the various 'wines' that might open up nonordinary consciousness, he urges the seeker to sit in the company of realized saints, who can facilitate sustained transformation. He writes, "Drink from the presence of saints, And not from those other jars. Be a connoisseur, and taste with caution!" (Barks, 1997, p. 6). Clearly, Rumi is warning the seeker of certain 'ecstasies', which are artificial, illusory, and transitory. According to Rumi these states may cause more harm than good in certain instances. He remarks that Real ecstasy comes from being in the presence of the saint.

In Sufism the saint is someone who has realized the profound truth that "I Myself am the Seeker and the Sought" (Chittick, 1983, p. 210). The saint has come through the perils of seeking and has arrived with an illuminated consciousness. They have worked through the layers of the ego rather than momentarily abandoning the false self in an

*induced* transcendent state. To be in the presence of such illumination is to be influenced by their realized state, and to benefit from their guidance and wisdom.

The co-researchers felt this seeking phase to be an important process in their journey towards nondual Self-realization. In Janan's own journey the silence she explored after her devastating illness led her down many pathways. She remarks, "at the beginning the silence was just to take a rest, then I realized that I was actually exploring silence as much as I had explored sound, and through that period very slowly a lot of things began to shift..." Janan's identity as a performer was the only one she knew her whole life. When her career suddenly ended she very abruptly had to re-evaluate all of her self-concepts in order to discover a new way of being in the world. Janan had quite an eclectic seeking phase that included studying different spiritual practices, such as meditation and yoga, traveling and pilgrimages to a variety of holy sites, and even many years in therapy. She notes that "I started to move over to studying yoga and slowly I started to study the real -- not only the *asanas* -- but the real basis of what Yoga is about, the path, the Yamas and Niyamas, the Vedanta, the Bhagavad Gita" She continues by saying,

I realized that the whole system of the chakras, and the breath, and the opening of the spine, and the central nervous system are completely the points that you need to sing, they all have to be activated and I've had again the great privilege of being aware of that since childhood that those places were very known to me.

Janan's study of yogic philosophy and metaphysics gave her a deeper understanding of the energy points she came to know through singing. Eventually Janan began to travel

abroad in search of deeper spiritual knowledge, a teacher, and a path she could devote her life to. The country she was consistently drawn back to was Nepal,

Nepal was just an extraordinary experience, I went there three years in a row and I was so captivated. It's an ancient culture and there is ah, that perfume of, of ah, this sense of the spiritual is in every moment no one questions it, in fact they probably don't even have a word for it, it isn't necessary to differentiate from it, from any other state of mind, everything is permeated by this.

In Nepal Janan began to study with a Tibetan Buddhist master, a master of the *powa* ceremony, which is the transference of consciousness at the moment of death. She noticed that there was a very strong connection between the ceremony for the dead, dying, mysticism and silence. At one point in our discussion she commented that mysticism is simply "a cult of death" and that what it means truly and fundamentally to be on a mystical path is to confront your own mortality. It means to approach death with very deep and careful contemplation. Janan's journey in seeking was far from a romanticized mystical affair; she did experience much turbulence and had encountered the narcissistic pull of spiritual materialism. Janan reflects about this point in the following passage,

I've made every mistake that's possible to make. I've seen spiritual materialism so much around me, and I've seen it in my own self. We have all had certain insights or extraordinary experiences um, it's really, really important to ah, disrobe that, but it doesn't come easily. I just think it's part of the potential pitfalls on the path is these, is our delusional states and you know, some of them are dangerously delusional, and some people are drawn to unfortunately, um, these

kinds of places. One needs to be well grounded, this is the odd thing, one does need to have a fairly sane grounding to circumnavigate a lot of these ideas and experiences and none of this should ultimately in the end be an idea. It should be a living experience a lived experience...

Janan has highlighted the very nature of this journey, which is that it is a *lived experience* and cannot be understood or conveyed through the intellect alone, or what Wilber calls the “eye of mind.”

Fouad was one co-researcher who fell into the trappings of the intellect, or the mental eye. He was born to Christian missionaries and was trained in theology from a young age. As both of his parents were academics, Fouad was steeped in book learning and philosophical ideas very early on. Much of his journey involved letting go of his tendency to rely on conceptual understandings and surrender to transpersonal ways of knowing.

Fouad’s seeking phase was catapulted around the age of 16, when his parents resumed their missionary work overseas and left him behind. This began a process of individuation, where he began to formulate beliefs that were separate from those he had upheld all his life. For Fouad this process of individuation occurred mostly in isolation and through book learning. He wanted to explore different ideas, ways of understanding the nature of existence, the purpose of human life, the metaphysics of the soul and different spiritual systems. He became caught up in metaphysics and religious discourse without actually embracing the experiential journey. Fouad comments,

My parents were big into philosophy to begin with, we always had books on philosophy around the house, um, I was always reading books on theology and



philosophy. I had an intense interest in ah, Nietzsche and philosophers like that, I had already read Kierkegaard and other spiritual Christian philosophers or existentialists, um, I liked existentialism; I particularly liked Aquinas and a lot of these types of theologians.

At this time Fouad began to read about Sufism, however he did not yet make the connection to practice; it was still an intellectual pursuit. During this time he had also read on magic, the occult and alchemy. Rumi warns about this potential pitfall, of the seeker remaining stuck in the exploration of ideas, when he writes, “You seek knowledge from books, what a shame! You are an ocean of knowledge hidden in a dew drop” (Chittick, 1983, p. 64). For Rumi gaining knowledge from books is simply an act of collecting information, belonging to the partial intellect. This information is devoid of Spirit, and is certainly without substantial transformative power.

One aspect of Nuriyana’s seeking was quite similar to Fouad’s in that she felt she needed to break away from the religious tradition of her birth through a process of individuation. The Muslim identity she upheld and complacently accepted for many years was now in question. Her own seeking was centered on figuring out who she was outside of the family, community and friends that were all part of the apparatus reinforcing her identity. She remarks, “there were two things, the teaching and the indoctrinating, the conditioning and all of that, than there was who I am within myself, and who that person really is.” Nuriyana decided to travel, and she explains her motivation behind the need to travel in the following passage,

I went to Malawi, um, in Africa, that’s where I wanted to know whether I wanted to remain a Muslim or not, and I knew I was going to be there by myself,

parachuting into the fourth poorest country in the world, I knew nobody, I was so happy about that, and no one knew me... I wanted to go to a place of solitude to awaken who I was and to see how deeply soaked this was in who I am, whether this reflected deeply my true self or whether these were just sort of, the outer layers of who I was that I just wore in order to maneuver in my world.

Nuriyana removed herself from the comforts and familiarity of her life. Her intent was to awaken to who she was beyond her religious identity. She felt the only way to do this was to break away from the environment that was reinforcing her present self-concepts and identifications. During this time Nuriyana read about meditation and chanting and its power to awaken deeper states of self-awareness. In her quest for self-knowledge she decided to choose a combination of Divine names to recite and meditate on. She recalls this time of experimentation as one that caused her to flounder between highs and lows, she explains,

I was taking these names and attributes, I was mixing and matching my own formula, and I was actually going in a circle, it was getting exhausting so I realized that the spiritual practices, my version of them, were ad hoc and arbitrary and that perhaps a real teacher and spiritual school had some hidden wisdom that could be the precise medicine for the soul to center and to know itself... and that my randomness, of using whatever name I liked of God and putting it altogether, could actually be moving me into a state of you know, like a vacillating state, a state of highs and then lows and then confusions.

Waliye, in his own reflections, echoes the instability that one can undergo during the experimental phase of the journey. He remarks, "Seeking is sort of a journey on its own

but it is sort of an experimental journey”, he notes, “because you’re trying this and you’re trying that, it can be more confusing than it’s actually putting you at ease.” Left to one’s own devices the seeker goes through a time of trial-and-error, having a desire for deeper self-knowledge yet remaining confused and uncertain of how to penetrate beyond the superficial layers of their psyche. Waliye’s own seeking was quite exhaustive and lengthy. He was led down many different pathways and experimented with many spiritual techniques, and in his desperation, turned to drug use. His journey was very turbulent and precarious. Waliye reflects,

I did experiment with some different religions and this and that. I ran into this book called “You Yourself” by Lobsang Rampa who professed he was taken over by the spirit of some high lama in Tibet. His book was about astral travel and even though he was later proven to be kind of a farce ah, the astral travel part worked. It was kind of awesome and of course it kind of stopped at that, and then I ran into a book called “The Satanic Verses” by Anton LaVey, I think his name is, and that was kind of bizarre. It’s a bit of an ego trip, you know, you dress all in black, but it wears out pretty quick, because it’s kind of a dead end this whole Satan nonsense. So then after that I believe I ran into Carlos Castaneda and I read all those books and that ended me up at the age of 17 in South America and I never did find anyone who remotely resembled Don Juan, although I’m sure shamans do exist but I think they pick you, you don’t pick them, and if ah, you know, if you’re not in line to be sought out then you’re not going to find the masters because they’re hiding themselves, as are all mystics really. So, uh, I think at the age of 18 or 19 I went to India and I was in India about a year and a

half and I studied under a bunch of gurus and I was in a Buddhist temple in Nepal for about 8 months but the routine and the repetitiveness of it, I just wasn't ready for, and the stringent life, 5 hours of sleep and the rest working or in meditation, right. The same thing happened when I tried to live as a Benedictine monk, I tried many different paths, then I kind of got into the dark streak of things and got into drugs and all kinds of things, and ah, for a long time the doors were completely shut to me.

In Waliye's seeking he recalls being led down dead ends, encountering false teachers, and experiencing the ego trip that comes with adopting a 'spiritual' and 'mystical' identity. The allure of chasing experiences under the guise of them being mystical and exotic might make one feel special or unique as they leave behind the ordinary for the extraordinary. For Waliye the search for powerful experiences and hidden masters was part of a delusional journey, which unfortunately led to self-aggrandizement.

Rumi poetically refers to the wants, desires and projections of the ego as the idols that bewilder the wayfarer. He writes,

Our pure hearts roam across the world.  
We get bewildered by all the idols we see,  
Yet what we're trying to understand in everything,  
is what we already are. (Helminski, 1999, p. 9).

Here, Rumi points to the paradox of the seeker, who travels the world searching for what they "already are." The seeker searches outside of who they are hoping that something they encounter might unlock this mystery for them, or that it may reflect something about their own inner Reality.

Traveling abroad has not escaped any one of the co-researchers, including Rashid. His travel to Burkina Faso, Africa, came at a pertinent time in his life, when he felt a discordance of values with his family and church community. Rashid left for Burkina Faso for one year, volunteering for Canada World Youth. “I was not actively seeking a new religious life or spiritual life” says Rashid, “ but I was open. I’m not sure if I was seeking consciously or unconsciously at the time - in retrospect I was still seeking justice and truth as I saw so much that was unjust.” The opportunity that Rashid had to leave his home and community awakened a yearning in him for a way of life that would reflect the values he held dear.

During his stay in Burkino Faso Rashid had an impacting experience that will be related in theme three.<sup>8</sup> Upon his return to Canada Rashid became very disheartened as he noted the disparity among the different countries. The imbalances in the distribution of wealth, goods and opportunities, even within his own country, became a source of great contemplation for Rashid. He reflects,

Before going to Africa I could walk into a supermarket and not think anything of it. My parents were peasants in East Prussia so we were raised partly against consumerism, but coming back from Africa and going into the supermarket here, um, it’s injustice. We have forty different detergents to choose from and in Burkina Faso people don’t even have soap... even today in our society. If you haven’t gone to Africa or India, visit a native reserve in our own country, we can go to the supermarket or to the mall and drive comfortably everywhere, a lot of

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<sup>8</sup> Evidently the themes are not strictly defined demarcations and do not necessarily follow the chronology of the co-researchers’ life stories. Instead, they reflect the tremendous fluidity of the journey.

people think its excessive or think we're so lucky, but to me we're not lucky because we're living on the backs of the rest of the world... so we're not lucky.

For Rashid, his travels to Africa revealed the wealth and privilege of the West, but even more unsettling for him is the “spiritual deprivation that we live in.” He admits that he was probably projecting his own spiritual impoverishment onto the rest of society, yet remains convinced about the palpable difference in spiritual attunement between the African and Canadian communities.

For Rashid this marked his awakening to the *samsaric* reality of existence. The imbalances, the injustices, and ultimately the suffering around him was reflected in his own self. In the Buddhist tradition *samsara* refers to the cycle of suffering. It also denotes a certain way of looking at the world, in its impermanence and through a lens of ignorance. When we do not see with the clarity of an Absolute perspective, the world becomes *samsaric* in nature. In Sufism the *dunya* is spoken of to evoke a similar concept. When we become trapped in the *dunya*, the material appearance of things, and become attached to it, we suffering greatly. In the Sufi tradition it is understood that by exploring one's own suffering and coming to an understanding of the root of suffering, it can be a pathway for transcendence. This central tenet of Sufism will be revisited later on in this chapter.

Rashid responded to the suffering he felt and observed in the world by becoming involved in activist groups and political endeavors. He desired to make a positive change in his community, and to raise awareness about the imbalances between the “developed” and the “undeveloped” world. Through his activist work Rashid confronted the harshness and violence of his own ego, as yet another expression of his shadow was revealed to

himself. After some time passed Rashid no longer found inspiration through activism and renounced it all together. It was at this time that his seeking turned in a very different direction. He reflects,

I had these old friends who, um, they gave me LSD without telling me, and they initiated me into this world, like it was a fantasy world, which was all based on LSD. That summer was all about self-exploration through LSD, altered states of consciousness, discovering what reality is, the nature of reality.

By turning to experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs, Rashid abandoned his search for identity. For a while after he had returned from Africa he was caught up with constructing an identity for himself in the world. He defined himself as a political activist, a socialist and an anthropologist, and was trying to forge a community around a set of common beliefs. In addition, he described his love for the field of anthropology as “a kind of secondary religion.” He had constructed different identities, rules and roles to live by in order to maneuver through his world. However, he realized that these were artificial self-constructs supported and created by the world. He desired something deeper and more lasting. When he began experimenting with LSD, with the intention of self-exploration, he very soon had his first experience of non-being. This experience was quite jarring for Rashid and made things complicated and unstable. He recalls his LSD trip in the following passage,

I passed a parking lot at the 7-Eleven, and I said okay God, and my desire was to surrender, complete surrender. I was walking towards the lake and I was totally confused because I didn't know if I was dead or alive so I asked God to tell me and I knew that if I kept walking towards the lake that I was scared I was going to

die if I wasn't dead already. I couldn't stop walking I just really didn't have any destination I had nowhere to go, and I was in this 7-Eleven parking lot and I saw the state of, I got into the state of non-being, or a state of, complete absorption. I completely dropped this search for identity, um who am I, it doesn't matter, where are we going, it doesn't matter, it was just the present moment. It was like the Buddha sitting under the tree, it's the reason why everyone goes to India to find enlightenment, and I found it at the 7-Eleven parking lot (laughs).

Although Rashid's high was a profound experience of nondual being, it did not last. He experienced a dramatic low afterwards. Although he had glimpsed a reality, which was truly beyond anything he could have imagined, he was left without any way of sustaining that reality. He explains his need for a framework or a language to explain and support deeper inquiry into this *essential* nature he had discovered. Eventually his journey led him to Sufism, a spiritual tradition equipped with methods and a language to explain what he had already experienced.

In this stage of the Sufi journey we have drawn attention to the "dance of seeking" and the various "wines", which temporarily catapulted the seeker into extraordinary worlds and experiences, only to have him or her resume ordinary consciousness. All of the co-researchers experienced a process of individuation, breaking away from the identity that was constructed by, and connected to their family of origin. Although the seeking journey is itself a paradox, it is a necessary stage in the journey. Rashid reflects on this paradox,



You don't have to go anywhere to seek or find, you don't have to go see the Dalai Lama or go to India to find a guru or go to Istanbul to the *tekke*<sup>9</sup>. I mean it's good if you do, it could help you out but it's not necessary. It's not necessarily *there* that you're going to realize that inner substance, but it could evoke in you the Real, by the mirroring of your surroundings.

### **Invitation to the Path: Synchronicity and the Divine Hand**

Those who walk on the Path have no longing after fine palaces and fair gardens. In their hearts is nothing but the pain of yearning love for God

Junayd, The Essential Sufism

The third theme in the Sufi journey is best characterized as an “invitation to the path” by way of “synchronicity and the Divine hand.” This invitation comes as a response to the yearning of the Soul. The yearning itself is also a kind of response as it has propelled the *salik* forward to seek a deeper understanding of their nature and purpose in the world. This yearning has planted a seed of interest in gaining self-knowledge, and to uncover what many of the co-researchers call their ‘true self.’ For the Sufi one is in a constant dialectical relationship with God. It is said that God, the Beloved, calls his lover to him, and the lover responds with longing. In this way, the Divine plants the seed of yearning for the human being by calling her closer. This exchange is mystical and elusive in which one is being carried on the waves of inaction - what in Taoism is called *wu-wei*. *Wu-wei* literally means “no action,” but more accurately represents a natural action or unfolding that corresponds to a deeper cosmic movement. The aspirant is perceivably ‘acting’ and ‘choosing’ their direction; however greater currents are carrying them.

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<sup>9</sup> Tekke is a Turkish word for lodge. It is the gathering place of the Sufi community.

Edward Slingerland (2007) defines *wu-wei* as “the phenomenological state of the doer” (p.7), which represents the urgings of one’s inner spiritual state. For the Sufi this drive is considered an inclination of the soul towards spiritual perfection or Oneness. In other words, it is the lover and Beloved pulling themselves into each other (Barks & Moyne, 1995, p. 180).

Although the seeker dances in and among a variety of potential pathways and experiments with different ‘wines’, it has not been in vain. The turbulence, frustration and pain they experience has been the expression of a thirst for something transcendent, and has brought them closer to the doorstep of the Path, or *tariqa*. In the words of Rumi, it is as if God is saying, “We have placed in you a substance, a seeking, a yearning, and We are watching over it and won’t let it be lost, but will bring it to its destined place” (Chittick, 1983, p. 96). For the Sufi the *tariqa*, known as the path or the way, is the vehicle that carries the seeker to their destiny. Therefore, the yearning and seeking will not but carry the seeker closer to their destined path.

Waliye had read extensively on many spiritual traditions, and was well informed about Sufism - its philosophy and methodology for Self-realization. He yearned to adopt the life of a Sufi, to one day join a Sufi community and receive guidance from a teacher. He remembers travelling all over Turkey in the early 1970’s looking for Sufis, without ever meeting one. He says, “when the path is ready for you it will appear, it chooses you, you cannot make this a reality if there isn’t any grace involved, the Divine hand orchestrates all of this.”

A few years later, during his travels to England, he did meet some Sufis from the Mevlevi order. For sometime Waliye lived and learned from this community, yet was not

entirely committed to the practice, especially after the passing of their Sheikh, their Spiritual teacher. Waliye then moved to Canada and came to terms with the idea that Sufism may not be the right path for him. He was comforted by a Sufi proverb which reads, “there are as many paths to God as there are human beings”, and took from this the wisdom that whatever unfolds will be the best opening for his own Self-realization.

A regular part of Waliye’s days in Toronto was his morning stop at a local middle-eastern coffee shop. He would often meet and talk to the regulars, who were mostly elderly gentlemen, and who often tried to persuade him to go to the mosque with them. He recalls,

They always tried to get me to the mosque, but I was never very interested in Islam. I always felt that Islam would be like the last religion that I would want anything to do with, it was too narrow, too stringent, anyways, so I told these guys, if you find me Sufis I’ll come to the mosque with you. So, one day, this little guy Ahmed, Turkish guy, says be here Monday night and I’ll introduce you to a dervish.

That Monday evening Waliye met one of the dervishes from the Jerrahi Sufi community and through their friendship Waliye was finally introduced to the Sufi community he had been seeking.

Unlike Waliye, Nuriyana’s invitation to the Sufi path began with a series of dreams about her spiritual teacher. Ten years earlier she had read a book he wrote on spirituality and the environment. She knew he was a scholar on the subject but was unaware that he was a Sufi teacher. It was only after she began her PhD work at the University of Toronto that her colleague informed her that he was a Sheikh of a Sufi

lineage. The reconnection to his writings was fortuitous, as Nuriyana had been seeking a more mystical spiritual practice. She had moved away from her strictly ‘exoteric’ understanding of her religion and began reading about Sufism. During the years leading up to this encounter she had been vacillating between highs and lows from the meditations and recitations she was putting together on her own. In her own words she speaks about being left to “egoic fluxes.” She was desperately yearning for spiritual guidance and a mystical community to be housed in. In this next passage she speaks about the significance of the Sufi *tariqa*,

This ancient wisdom that gets protected, that gets elucidated through a lineage of these brotherhoods, right, these societies these lineages, these *silsilas* or *tariqas*, um, I kind of wanted to be housed in that because I already knew from experience that being outside of it leaves you to your own, you know, your own ideas, and your own egoic fluxes, and I wouldn’t know how to differentiate the psychic from the spiritual for example.

Nuriyana believed that being housed within a *tariqa* would offer her a very direct way to “engage and deepen her heart knowledge.” This is because the *tariqa* has been sanctified and secured through a chain of transmission called a *silsila*. Essentially the *silsila*, which means both lineage and transmission, refers to the transmission of Divine Grace, *Baraka*, through an unbroken chain beginning with the Prophet Muhammad. According to Sufism the Prophet Muhammad was a Light bearer who received the transmission of Divine Light, al-Nur in his innermost heart. This sacred kernel of Pure consciousness, is the substance of transmission, often called *sirr-e-sirr*, which is an Arabic expression translated as “mystery of mysteries” and less technically as innermost consciousness. The

Sufis report that the Prophet passed this innermost consciousness, which is pure and undefiled in its essential nature, to his successor by way of spiritual transmission. The Sheikh is one who has received this transmission from the unbroken chain leading back to the Prophet Muhammad that ultimately has its source in God.

The co-researchers communicated that the *tariqa* was a crucial element in their spiritual development and provided an invisible fortress around their spiritual heart. They felt that the *tariqa* nurtures and protects the *essence* channeled through their spiritual heart. It is like the husk or the shell of a nut that encloses the nourishing center. There is an inherent alchemy in following the *tariqa*; its prescriptions are meant to transmute the lower aspects of the self into the highest virtues. It provides a way for the aspirant to ascend the rungs of the self towards spiritual perfection.

Fouad had his very first encounter with Sufism in high school. In his Eastern philosophy class a student gave a presentation on a book by Idries Shah, a popular Sufi writer. Fouad was pleased to know of this different perspective within the tradition, as he had become alienated from the Muslim community. He recalls having a profound interest in the Sufi way but did not think it was practiced today in the modern West. Soon after the presentation the pieces of Fouad's invitation started to come together.

The following month, while passing a bookstore, Fouad happened to notice an elaborately designed book cover in the window. He bought this book because of its beautiful cover, which was a picture of an intricately woven Persian rug. As it turned out the book was a collection of Sufi poetry by one of the greatest Sufi writers, Jalal ad-Din Rumi. He reflects about the deep resonance he had while first reading through Rumi's poems,

I would say it is like an intuitive understanding. I felt like he was speaking at a very profound spiritual level to me and on my level, um, he made me cry, you know, he was speaking about the same issues of the heart I felt I was encountering, and every time I picked up this book there would be something that would be so powerfully directed at me or my spiritual condition that I couldn't help but recognize that he's speaking to me almost as if he is writing this for me, um, which is, it's a good feeling that your spiritual condition is shared with somebody else.

Fouad was so moved from reading this book that he contacted an Islamicist at the University of Toronto who then gave him the information of the Jerrahi Sufi community. Fouad was ecstatic to know that Sufi communities were existent, as he thought they were an outdated and archaic form of Islam that perished sometime during the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Looking back on his journey Fouad recognizes the synchronicities that led him to a living Sufi community. He reflects,

These things coming together consecutively are too much to be coincidences and there's like a script, a plan or Divine power that guided you through all of it... and there's just an overwhelming sense that this was meant to happen um, and I can most powerfully point to that in the way that I was guided to Islam and Sufism itself. Coming into contact with these books, coming into contact with the Sheikh, feeling that, you know, resonate with an essential part of my core. Going to Turkey and being able to have some of the travels and some of the experiences that I've had in my life. And then later looking back on that going, if I had written a script for myself and planned it, I could have never orchestrated this...

The co-researchers all point to the synchronicities that were operating during their journeys, and feel that it was the unfolding of a script or Divine plan that orchestrated the events of their lives and brought them into the presence of the Shaykh and the Sufi community.

Rashid's first exposure to Islam was in Burkina Faso, Africa. He heard a young village boy reciting the Qur'an and thought it sounded beautiful, however, he did not pursue his intrigue. Upon returning to Toronto, Rashid became very active in organizing a social activist group for the homeless. One evening he held a film night fundraiser at the University of Toronto. He recalls meeting a tall friendly man who mentioned being part of the Jerrahi Sufi order. Although he sensed a familiarity when speaking to this man, he did not remain in contact with him. As it turned out, a few months later he was reunited with this individual in a chance encounter.

Rashid notes that before being reunited with this man, a few significant events occurred. He needed to write a paper for his anthropology class, which required him to do fieldwork, and participate in a religious ceremony that was foreign to him. He explains,

Our mid term assignment was to go to a religious community that we were not familiar with, observe a ritual and write a paper on that ritual. At the time I was living with this guy Alex who would always listened to Qawwali, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, I couldn't get enough of it, and I'm like "Alex what is this?" and he's like "this is Sufism" and I'm like "well what's that?", and he's like "we'll in India and Pakistan they grow their hair and they smoke joints and they dance and they make this kind of music" and I'm like "well do you think there is anything like

this in Toronto because I have to do this project for class?” and he’s like “oh no no no, this only happens in India and Pakistan.”

Soon after this conversation with his roommate, Rashid stumbled upon an advertisement for a concert that was being held at a famous venue in Toronto called Massey Hall. It was a show of traditional Sufi music and dance by the whirling dervishes of Turkey. He was given permission to write his paper on this event even though it was a public performance held outside of a typical religious setting. The events that followed the concert led Rashid to a clear invitation to Sufism, an invitation that was a response to his yearning, and a reflection of his own deep desire for self-understanding. He recalls,

It was after the show and we were leaving Massey hall. We got out of the door and these two guys approached me and one of them was the same guy Ishmael from that film night, and he’s with another man, and they approached me, and there was such magnetism, and they handed me an invitation, and they said “Do you want to look at yourself in the mirror? Do you want to see who is really there?”

Rashid received a direct invitation to discover his true identity through this providential encounter. It was an invitation “to look at himself in the mirror,” and to see the reflection of his own *essence*, his true identity. The invitation was therefore an invitation to begin a journey of self-knowledge, a sacred gift offering inner-transformation.

Although Janan lived 10 minutes from the Jerrahi Sufi community in Toronto, she had to travel around the world until she was finally led to the doorstep of this community. Janan’s story is truly a testament to the Sufi proverb, “you don’t choose the path, the path chooses you.” The unfolding of her invitation began at the end of her third trip to Nepal.



On her way to the airport she stopped at a bookstore to pick up a few novels for the flight home. She recalls how a particular book on Sufism came into her life,

I stopped in at Pilgrims bookstore and this book came into my hands and I thought I should put it back on the shelf because my suitcase was full. I could not take one more book home, and it was um, an American Sufi, talking about his experience in Sufism, so I pushed it back on the shelf and I flew 33 hours home. The next day, back in Toronto, I was meeting a friend who said let's meet in the bookstore so I wouldn't have to wait outside - it was the middle of winter. As I was waiting for him the same book fell off the shelf and into my hands so that's when I bought it.

After reading the book, which was about one man's journey in Sufism, Janan developed a strong calling to visit Istanbul. In less than a week Janan had made arrangements for her stay in Istanbul and in her words was "following the promptings" of this mysterious calling. Janan was not particularly hopeful of meeting Sufis in Turkey, as the practice had been outlawed in the country since 1925, as part of the official secularization process of Turkey instituted by Kemal Ataturk. All of the performances by the "whirling dervishes" were permitted only on the "condition that it be a nonreligious activity, designed especially for foreign tourists" (Ernst, 2003, p. 16). Janan did attend a performance of whirling dervishes and a concert of traditional Turkish music, however the Sufi communities were so well hidden that she did not count on visiting a real Sufi *Tekke*. The afternoon of her last day in Turkey she went to the local bazaar to look for an ornate copy of the Qur'an and ended up making a very important connection.

We went to the grand bazaar and I saw in my guidebook that there was a book bazaar adjacent to it and somehow we found it in this labyrinthine thing. I, again for some reason wanted to get a Qur'an and there were thousands, millions of them I went from store to store. I went clockwise around and went into every single shop and did not buy anything, until I came to the last shop. I walked in and there was this beautiful young man sitting with a large picture on the wall of this very old man behind him. Something happened that was truly magical and unexpected, by the end of that conversation, this mans name was Junayd by the way, he sent us to the Jerrahi dergah that very evening.

The man Janan met in the bookstore happened to be the son of the late Muzaffer Effendi, the Jerrahi Shaykh who first brought the lineage to North America in the 1970's. This was a fortunate meeting in and of itself, however what was even more profound was the invitation Janan received to attend the Sufi gathering which was being held that very evening. It is important to note here that Sufi communities meet weekly to hold their remembrance ceremony called *dhikrullah*, and it just so happened that the night of the gathering was to be held on that very day. Janan recalls the extraordinary details of her first *dhikr* experience,

I was so profoundly moved by the *dhikr* and by the music and by the sound. It was really one of those life changing experiences and it was as if everything had come together to that moment and all those paths had led to that and it was all taking place directly in the heart... but I had to go back to Toronto the next morning and I just thought how can I touch this again, I have to find this again.

After returning to Toronto Janan discovered that the book she originally read about the American mans' experience in Sufism was the autobiography of an American Sheikh of the Jerrahi order.

Once I got home I re-read Lex Hixon's book and I realized that the bookstore in Istanbul was of his master Muzaffer Effendi and that Junayd was Muzaffer Effendi's son and I had no idea, I didn't know who Lex Hixon's master was and in fact I wasn't even sure he was Turkish.

The synchronicity of every detail in her story, the series of events that brought her to her first *dhikr* was, she felt, truly a Divine orchestration. All of the pieces in her journey seemed to have converged at this one point, and had cemented for her a spiritual path. However, her life in Toronto was still without a connection to Sufism and for some reason the neighboring Jerrahi community was not yet known to her. It was almost as if the seed that was planted in Istanbul needed time to ripen in order to prepare for receiving the *tariqa*.

Almost two years after her first experience of the *dhikr*, there was another chance meeting. While she was working at a concert hall as an event co-ordinator, some university students approached her, wanting to hold an evening of Sufi music. Janan recalls the first time she met with the musicians who were to perform for this event,

They started introducing themselves, a few of them were from the Jerrahis and it was the first time I heard that word in two years. I explained the night of the *dhikr* in Istanbul, that set that music in my psyche, and ah, the pursuit to hope that one day I might touch it again. I knew it was going to lead me here but it had taken me

two years and all of this, all of these were the blind alleys and the way stations that led me to Tevfik Baba, and the Jerrahi community in Toronto.

The co-researchers have all elucidated a very fortuitous process in discovering their path. They have all come out of seeking and arrived at the doorstep of the Sufi *tariqa*. Waliye makes an interesting observation about the transition from seeking to embracing the Sufi path. He says, “I believe, that seeking ceases once you have decided upon a particular course of action, so if you take hand with an order that is now the way you have chosen, so seeking ceases and the journey begins.” For all five co-researchers the invitation to the Sufi path has been accepted and their journey in Sufism has now begun.

### **Entering Dervishhood: Surrendering to the Care of the Spiritual Physician**

Whoever enters the Way without a guide will take a hundred years to travel a two-day journey.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, The Sufi Path of Love

In the last theme the co-researchers describe their invitation to the path, figuratively, as arriving at the doorstep of the *tariqa* or the Sufi way. To enter this path, and participate in the Sufi journey one needs to be accepted by the gatekeeper who waits at the door. This individual who initiates the aspirant into dervishhood is the spiritual teacher, known as the Sheikh.

The word dervish comes from *dar*, which is Persian for “door.”<sup>10</sup> It evokes the sense of someone who is living in poverty and going door-to-door in order to gain worldly sustenance, food and shelter. In the words of Chittick, “in the context of Persian

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<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the English “door” and “dar” come from the same Indo-European root, since Persian is also an Indo-European language.

and Arabic Sufi writings the word “poverty” (*faqr, darwishi*) is synonymous with Sufism, and a “poor man” (*faqir, darwish*) is a Sufi” (1983, p. 186). However, the meaning of dervish within a Sufi context is far deeper than its external, more obvious meaning implies. The dervish is someone who has given up the world and selfhood in order to subsist in Divine Unity. Under the guidance of the Sheikh, the dervish becomes empty of selfhood and essentially ‘owns nothing.’ To rid oneself of all worldly attachment, as well as psychological and emotional attachments related to the self, is to be ‘poor’ in this sense. The word Sufi is also synonymous with dervish in that “sufi,” according to the most commonly accepted definition, comes from the Arabic *suf*, which refers to the woolen garments worn by the early ascetics. Another derivation for the origin of the word “sufi” is the Arabic *safa*, which refers to purity. From this perspective, the sufi is an individual who has “purified himself from his own selfhood” (Chittick, 1983, p. 187). Neither of these derivations are mutually exclusive, because both poverty and purity are required conditions for annihilation and non-existence.

The Sheikh has many different functions, which are elucidated by the co-researchers in this section. One principal function is to “help the student grow beyond the boundaries of self. Because each person can only, by definition, operate inside his or her current limits, outside intervention is indispensable in order to make the ‘breakthrough’” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 128). The Sheikh facilitates greater self-awareness for the dervish, and instigates the journey that leads the aspirant to unlock his or her own eternal mystery.

The first stage of dervishhood is to fall in love with the Sheikh. At this stage the relationship between the dervish and the Sheikh is devotional in nature. All of the co-

researchers note an immediate attraction they felt for the Sheikh, as they were drawn into his or her presence like “a moth to a flame.” Rashid recalls his first encounter with the Sheikh. He says “I remember seeing the Sheikh for the first time, just seeing him, I didn’t know who it was, but I just knew it was someone very special.” Nuriyana recounts her feelings of deep love for the Sheikh after meeting him for the first time,

I really loved the Sheikh and I didn’t understand this love, it was um, the first time that I saw him. I had this tremendous love that was not rational. I had never met him before, how could I love someone who I hadn’t even met? Where did it come from?

The co-researchers fell in love with the Sheikh, with a love that may be characterized as a non-sexual romantic love. Fouad recalls the magnetism he felt when he first saw the Sheikh,

I remember coming into this room and there was, the Sheikh, he was sitting in the corner and he was speaking about love and compassion... and I remember he was particularly talking about how you should show compassion towards the whole of creation um, to the animals, to the environment, even to the ozone layer, this is part of your um, responsibility, and I remember just feeling immediately like I loved this person, not only was he speaking in a beautiful way, but there was something attractive about his spirit.

The Sufis explain the attraction to the Sheikh as an attraction to the Divine. The heart of the Sheikh is like a polished mirror, and in the mirror the dervish sees his or her own *pure* essence. The student is not drawn to the luminosity of the man, but to the Divine light, which radiates undefiled through the Sheikh. The disciple is able to recognize this

luminosity precisely because it exists within his or herself. Eventually the dervish becomes intoxicated and absorbed in their Love, *Ishq*, for the Sheikh, and this love is like an elixir for their soul in that it has a transformative power. The grand Sheikh of the Jerrahi order, Muzzaffer Effendi, speaks in this next passage about the transmission of Love between the student and teacher, and the necessity of falling in love with the Sheikh,

The lovers' success is most enhanced by affection for their spiritual guide and by loving performance of their service to him or her... affection for the guide, arising from deep within the pupil, is like the spiritual river flowing in the inner being of the guide. Indeed this abundant flow causes the bounty of the spiritual guide to spill over to the pupil. Thus the current of this bounty ebbs or flows according to the pupil's affection for the guide. In short, the pupil should love the guide with a genuine, sincere and unhypocritical affection. It should be well understood that there is a path from heart to heart. Therefore, pupils are repaid for their love and affection toward their guide by the blessings they experience from the guide. This has stood the test of centuries and constitutes the essence of practical truths.

(Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 139)

The Sheikh has a spiritual influence on the dervish as the essence of his or her being 'spills over' to the student. The *Baraka*, grace and blessings, are transmitted from the heart of the master to the heart of the student, as well as the innermost consciousness (*sirr-e-sirr*). The Love that is reciprocated between the student and dervish is healing and alchemical - it elevates the student beyond the constraints of the ego and into a greater understanding of their reality.

The exchange of Love, described by Muzaffer Effendi, is a catalyst for realizing the essence of Consciousness. The importance of initiation, which involves taking hand with the Sheikh, *bayah*, is for the transmission of consciousness to take place between the student and the teacher. In Sufi cosmology, God, otherwise called the Absolute or pure consciousness, is often characterized as Love. This Love is considered the innermost reality and kernel of consciousness, *sirr-e-sirr*, an expression also meaning mystery and innermost secret.

In this next passage Rashid expresses his devotion to his teacher as a commitment to realizing Oneness, which he feels is the ultimate end of the student teacher relationship,

The teacher is the manifestation of the message, which is Oneness, and we follow the teacher to that point. Not only in spiritual matters but materially if the teacher says not to eat too much, then we don't eat too much - it's all connected. When you give hand it's this idea that the teacher is in protection of your soul. You've entrusted your soul, you may have best friends or people you're married to, but our service is first to our teacher when we talk about matters of the soul. We're really giving our hand to God through the teacher in *bayah*, it is a commitment to Oneness and to realize the full potential of our being.

Entrance into dervishhood comes through *bayah*, or initiation. As Rashid explains, the commitment one makes in *bayah* is to realize Oneness. The initiation ceremony is a private ritual involving prayer, meditation, recitation and *bayah*, or *taking hand*. In *bayah* the disciple kisses the right hand of the Sheikh as a symbol of their submission and



commitment to their teacher, who is ultimately, “a manifestation of the message.” At this point of surrender, *Baraka*, or spiritual power and blessings are transmitted to the student.

Rashid has pointed out that the dervish gives their hand “to God through the teacher.” Without a Sheikh, as Rumi observes, a journey of “two days would last one hundred years” since the individual would be left to struggle with their own ego fluxes and compulsions rather than learning to go beyond the boundaries of the self. Surrender to the Sheikh is the first stage in submission, and is implemented skillfully to train the dervish for their complete surrender into nondual Being. In this next passage Waliye describes his experience as a young initiate into Sufism, living in a Sufi community, and the approach his Sheikh used to tame the ego,

I took *bayah*, which is taking hand ah, with a very strict Sheikh a very intense guy. Everyone would be assigned jobs in the *tekke* in the *dergah*, and ah, once you started liking that job and you became too cocky at it, he would pull you away and give you something you totally hated until you liked it again. We’d also have to share rooms, 6 people to a room, and as soon as we got too chummy he’d shuffle everybody around and mix everybody up, and he also sorted out who got along with each other the least and that guaranteed the people you’d get the room with the next day, because the idea of Sufism especially in the very beginning is to become reliant on a higher power not on your likes, dislikes and all those sort of things because that is the source of suffering, or at least one of them.

For the Novice dervish, the training they undergo, under the direction of the Sheikh, is to learn to surrender to their higher self. For many, being a slave to the whims and wishes of the ego is a source of immense suffering. To become reliant on a higher power may

liberate the individual from being governed by the demands of their ego. Waliye reflects on the wisdom behind the stringent lifestyle he experienced under the guidance of the Sheikh,

It's about subduing the ego to the degree that the ego becomes the toolbox that it really is. The ego is the toolbox that we need in order to survive on this earth and in that toolbox are all the little tools we need. And the idea is to put the ego under charge of the higher self, which is the same place wisdom comes from, and use it when you need it. Unfortunately the toolbox is generally in charge of people as opposed to people using it as the tool it is.

Another function of the Sheikh, here elucidated by Waliye, is of subduing the ego. In moving beyond the confines and control of the ego one may open to the wisdom that flows freely from their higher self. Many of the co-researchers recall experiencing harshness from their Sheikh. As the Sheikh attempts to tame the ego it may lash out in defense or project its own shadow aspects onto the Sheikh.

The ego has strong attachments to identity and ideology, which need to be undone. All ideologies including religious ideologies can act as barriers to transcendence and can be very dangerous on the path. For instance, a Sufi proverb states “do not worship Islam, worship God.” The intention behind this saying is to highlight the danger inherent in turning to the means as the end, in other words, making out religion or some substitute ideology as an end in itself rather than a means for realizing Truth. Nuriyana recalls how her Sheikh challenged her own attachment to her identity as a feminist,

I'm a product of my society and my society is full of feminists like me, so subscribing to male patriarchal authority was a no no. I thought I could be content

as a spiritual wanderer, but oddly when I went to meet the Sheikh to ask about taking hand, I, um, became very quiet in his presence. He didn't speak so much but whatever he said, it was piercing, it was stabbing. It was so harsh in its gentleness. It was as if he knew exactly where to go and what needed to be said, and I left him that day hating him. I remember that, I was crying in the car because he said, essentially he said that I couldn't be a feminist and be his student. He said that very clearly. I realized later that what he meant is do not confuse ideology for Truth and when you move towards the truth with a capital T it will illuminate all of these temporal ideas and thoughts that come in and seek to elaborate on the disconnection in the world and the fragmentation of the self, so the Truth illuminates the cracks of our understanding, as opposed to putting up this really tottery wallpaper that comes up and tries to fill up the cracks and tries to make it look pretty. So that's what he was really saying but I didn't get that until, you know, months later.

It is worth highlighting Nuriyana's observation here that the Sheikh "knew exactly where to go and what needed to be said" in order to breakdown some of her attachments to ideology. She developed a sense of "hating" the Sheikh, which is a common response when the ego feels threatened. The co-researchers all described experiences of the Sheikh deconstructing their ego-identifications and attachments to a constructed self. The Sheikh would skillfully reveal the illusory nature of these self-constructs. Nuriyana notes that the Sheikh's approach was "so harsh in its gentleness." The "harsh approach" of the Sheikh, which is done solely out of compassion for the student, is a powerful tool used to incite the student to contemplate deeper into their reality.

Nuriyana spoke about how the ideologies she upholds “elaborate on the disconnection in the world and the fragmentation of the self.” She described how the ego clings to different ideologies about the world in an attempt to understand it as a whole. In effect what we do is break down the world into all of these ideologies, which are all based on partial truths. They are then used to fight one another and cause greater divisiveness among people. A similar phenomenon occurs within each individual. We construct false identities and idols within our self that form the mosaic of our personality. This leads to a fragmented psyche, and a disconnection of all of these disparate parts within the self, that in turn, prevent us from achieving wholeness. The ego has a tendency to grasp on to external things, people and ideas to create an identity for itself. In fact the Sheikh can sometimes be implicated in this process whereby the dervish creates an idol out of their teacher. When the Sheikh becomes, yet another idol, he or she can get in the way of the disciple’s realization. Rumi assures the dervish, that “the true teacher knocks down the idol that the student makes of him” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 128). In other words, the relationship with the teacher can also become a potential pitfall if the Sheikh is not approached as a means to Truth.

After a few months of resisting the authority of the Sheikh, Nuriyana had a few prominent dreams about *taking hand*. Despite her feelings towards the Sheikh, her dreams strongly indicated that she should surrender to his guidance. She felt that his guidance was “the continuity of Divine revelation” and her dreams were a Divine invitation. Eventually Nuriyana had a “surrender experience” in the presence of the Sheikh that she describes in the following passage,

When I met with him the next time, I came into the room to speak with him and I just surrendered. It was this very strong and clear surrender, it was just like my armour was down. I could literally be exposed. It was as if I couldn't hide behind the little truths that you say to yourself, right? That is what is so beautiful about the Sheikh's relationship is that in the presence of the spiritual master in which I, entrapped by my own ego and really completely utterly caught in the veils that I put on myself about myself, have to come into a presence where I can first see my own truth and all of the cracks and the holes. And to then be able to expose that to somebody else and to be completely safe in doing that because I assure you that it doesn't matter if some one tells you what they see in you, because you'll never believe it if you don't see it yourself, so essentially I was able to surrender to myself first and then surrender to him and basically say these are my ailments, and if I'm really in this for its deepest transformative ah, possibilities I have to be completely and utterly transparent to myself about myself, where you shine the light on your own soul and especially on those places, those cervices you know, ego places where you think no one will know about.

Nuriyana realizes that the greatest act of surrender is surrendering to oneself. To become self-honest means no more hiding behind the justifications or self-deception we create to avoid or mask certain troubling aspects of who we are.

Nuriyana mentions that she felt safe in revealing "herself to herself", and sitting in transparency before the Sheikh. In this surrender experience, one can no longer hide the uncomfortable or 'dark' parts, as all aspects come into the light in the presence of the Sheikh. The relationship with the Sheikh is key for the aspirant's spiritual development.

The authenticity of the Sheikh inspires the same authenticity from the student. The disciple is exposed for who they truly are in the presence of the Sheikh. The disciple is able to honestly reflect about all aspects of his or her self. This is tremendously humbling for the disciple and facilitates the surrendering process, and the subduing of the ego.

Fouad shares a similar experience in the following passage in which the Sheikh illuminates unconscious parts of himself. He speaks about developing a greater sense of awareness about the many desires and ego-driven responses he had not confronted so directly. He reflects,

When you are first on this path you will, at first, feel like you're becoming worse and the Sheikh said like you'll be more conscious of your anger, um, rage, lust, all these emotions. And you'll think now I'm getting worse, and actually what you're doing is you're becoming more conscious of who you were at the beginning and instead of excusing it to yourself, instead of um, finding justifications for your feelings, you recognize them, and you'll be able to deal with them. And getting better is certainly not having to become a saint or anything, you know... but I'm better able to understand my feelings and better able to integrate myself.

In this passage Fouad speaks to the importance of not judging or shutting out certain aspects of who we are because we may feel they are "bad" or "shameful." He speaks about becoming more conscious of these parts of himself, owning them, and recognizing them for what they are. In this way, one will have more awareness of what drives or triggers them in certain situations and consequently will have more control over emotional fluxes, rather than being pulled and consumed by them.

Fouad describes the first time he met the Sheikh and recalls that, “I felt that he knows my soul.” Fouad describes the experience as though feeling his soul was being “weighed and measured” in the presence of the Sheikh. “I get a sense that on a spiritual level he’s reading my soul, which means that he’s able to speak to the spiritual core of my issues.” Being in the care of a spiritual teacher is one that is invaluable for the student, and was especially the case for Fouad. Fouad was still quite young when he became initiated, the youngest of all of the co-researchers. He was only twenty years of age. At this time he was alienated from his parents and had spent some time on the streets. He had developed some psychological malaise and depression from the tensions between himself and his family, and was traumatized by his experience living on the streets. He greatly feared returning to homelessness. He remarks that the Sheikh “helped me to straighten out my mind to a considerable degree.” Fouad describes the first few years with the Sheikh as a time of great healing. It was a time when he was in the care of “the spiritual physician.” The characterization of the Sheikh as a *spiritual physician* is echoed by Nuriyana,

He becomes your spiritual doctor, right? It’s sort of like I have enough people to turn to in the world to deal with the world, you have doctors and psychiatrists and you know friends. There’s so much support and mechanisms to facilitate your external journey, which is momentary and fleeting and it’s the temporal world that I have so much support with, but and I didn’t have a single mechanism of support to help me make sense of the eternal and everlasting world, or a guide to help me with what is everlasting, Real and permanent. There is only just a handful you might come across in your life, if you’re lucky, so I knew that I had to latch

on to the Sheikh because that was a relationship that was going to be everlasting and immensely curative.

The analogy of the spiritual physician is used to describe the Sheikh as a master of spiritual wellbeing. The master student relationship is immensely curative for the co-researchers. The Sheikh assesses and treats spiritual diseases, in the same way that a medical physician provides medicines to heal the physical body. One entrusts their physical wellness to the physician. Similarly, in *taking hand* one entrusts their soul in the Sheikh's care. Annemarie Schimmel, a reputed authority on Sufism, addresses the necessity of the "soul doctor" on the dervishes' journey. She writes,

On the long hard road that faces the disciples, he needs a guide, the Sheikh, for it is dangerous to wander alone. The prophets and saints are the soul doctors who can successfully diagnose the sicknesses and weaknesses of the soul, and if a person entrusts himself to them with no questions, they can heal these as well. However, their healing methods are sometimes quite severe. They show the wanderers that they must "die before their death", that they must completely lose their own being. (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 146)

Some of the co-researchers recalled experiencing "stern" or "severe" approaches from the Sheikh. These approaches may appear harsh, but they are meant for healing. They emerge from a place of the highest discernment and deepest compassion. The Sheikh is the one who has mastered his or her own ailments and specializes in diagnosing and treating the weaknesses of the soul in others. The ultimate function of the Sheikh is to lead the dervish to *fana* or "annihilation", to 'die before death' and lose one's attachment to an ego-driven existence.



The kind of relationship that develops with the Sheikh is very profound and very sacred. The credentials of the Sheikh as a spiritual physician are elucidated by Nuriyana in the following passage. She remarks,

I don't see him in the present moment as a human being that just comes in my life and helps me here and there. I see him as literally um, a guidepost that will have an impact eternally. He is the authority of transmission that relates first from God and is transmitted through a chain that is held and secured through the traditional sacred wisdom and he is the speaking part of that. He is who is manifesting in this world right here, right now, and when he speaks and I engage with him I am capturing perennial wisdom. I am capturing primordial knowledge, I am capturing and I am engaging an interaction with what is beyond the physicality of our bodies and our particular experiences of our particular time and place, that engagement is about a mystical knowledge that is speaking from the soul that knows no boundary of time, to another soul, and I feel that utterly and deeply even though we are meeting in the world at this point and we are eating from the world and we are moving bodies in the world.

The Sheikh meets you in a place that is beyond the *here and now* of what is most apparent, and awakens what is truly available to us in the present moment. He invites you into a space that transcends mundane existence, where souls meet and mingle and the teaching comes principally from the source of Spirit. Nuriyana has described the Sheikh as the mouthpiece of God and his words as a continuation of Divine revelation.

Fouad spoke about a telepathic ability the Sheikh has to read the

soul and assess the spiritual state of the dervish. He explains that since all of the souls are connected in that nondual, transcendent space the Sheikh can acquire knowledge about the reality of the soul. For Fouad “human souls are all connected and because you are struggling along the same path that they have travelled or have reached the end of it, they are able to communicate to you because you’re soul is also on that same journey.” Fouad is pointing to a resonance here, a familiarity that each soul has with one another because of their fundamental connectedness.

Janan also shared her experience with the Sheikh and spoke about the wisdom that disseminates through the spiritual master. Describing the qualities and abilities of her own Sheikh she remarks,

The Sheikh is intelligent and fierce and is a no BS kind of guy. And he is also deeply artistic, an appreciator of the arts, and is a formidable intellectual. The remarkable thing about the Sheikh, and I have witnessed this a couple of times is sometimes when he speaks its like he’s speaking from somewhere else, and I’ve spoken to him after his *sobhets*<sup>11</sup> and he has said that he has been speaking from another place that he knows not where it comes from.

The Sheikh can access to what is beyond the appearance of what seems immediately real and true. This is one of the astounding qualities of the Sheikh, is that they can speak from a place of Self-realization and be unaware of where their words come from. It is truly inspired speech, and this is why the Sheikh’s speech is considered a continuation, on a much smaller scale, of the revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad from God. The

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<sup>11</sup> In the Sufi tradition a *sobhet* is the name of a spiritual talk given by a master of spiritual knowledge.

co-researchers have all expressed feeling that the Sheikh has special access to Truth, and are therefore drawn to this wisdom.

The Sheikh becomes the spiritual authority who guides and directs the dervish to his or her own experience of transcendence. The Sufi master, in his perfection, embodies the transpersonal self and has an open and receptive Beingness. The Sheikh is Realized, or as Fouad has described, “has arrived.” Fouad describes the characteristics of the Sheikh and elaborates on his presence and awareness as follows,

They are what we are meant to be as human beings. They are intellectually spiritual, in their practice, in their mind, in their heart, they are compassionate, wise, caring beings that we are meant to be as servants of God in serving the creation, “The best amongst you are those who are beneficial to the creation” you know. Number one they are aware, they have a spiritual presence with a capital P...they are fully conscious in the moment. They are “sons of the moment” there is a Sufi phrase that goes, “sons of the moment”, which means that they are fully here, they know why they are here and they know what to do in the moment. They are aware of their responsibilities in the moment, they are aware of how best to act to accomplish what they need to... and their ability to spiritually benefit hundreds of people with one act or one word, there’s something behind the obvious efforts that we cannot see.

Fouad’s description of the Sheikh bears a striking resemblance to the Bodhisattva, who represents the ideal of enlightenment in the Buddhist tradition. The Bodhisattva’s purpose is to bring all of creation to enlightenment through their wisdom and compassion. The actions of the Bodhisattva are said to be perfect and effortless, they always know how to

respond to the present moment. There is a definite parallel in the description of the Sheikh as the “sons of the moment” and the enlightened Bodhisattva, as they both act skillfully and spontaneously to spiritually awaken those around them.

Being in the care of the Sheikh is crucial for the student’s development. For Janan her battle with cancer was also a great teacher for her. This was a unique aspect among the other co-researchers stories that came through strongly for Janan at this juncture. She described her experience as follows,

Cancer has been one of my greatest teachers. It is such an enormous practice that I have to say a lot of that other stuff just pales in comparison. It’s such a lion to struggle with, it’s a huge teaching, there isn’t anything that it doesn’t cover, and it’s enormous and it’s unpredictable and ah, mysterious and harsh and hurtful and loving, and it’s everything and ah, I’m sure that everything that I ever did led up to being ready to welcome it but um, and I did often get comfort from, you know, the saying “God won’t give the heart anything more that it can bear” um, which is the perfection of our suffering, you know?

In this passage Janan has described her battle with cancer as a great teacher for her. A very humbling experience, as it brought her to the brink of death. In that space she felt that great knowledge came to her, which has never fully dissipated. In this vignette she refers to a Qur’anic verse in which God says “He will not give the heart more than it can bear” (Qur’an 2:286). The idea is that difficulty and ease always come together, one following the other, and that whatever trials we are given is for the benefit of our own transformation. This is why the Sufis speak about the “perfection of suffering”, which is a bittersweet analogy about honoring sorrow when it comes into our lives, and working

towards understanding its purpose. Suffering can act as a means for transformation, which, if used as a point of contemplation, can lead one to deeper insights and greater spiritual awakening.

After many years of life experience and spiritual training on the Path, Janan and Waliye, gradually took on the teaching role. They both moved away from needing the same kind of relationship with the Sheikh that they once did as novices. Although Janan never had children of her own, she speaks about her many ‘kids’ whom she mentors and guides in spiritual and life matters.

There are many different stages in the relationship with the Sheikh. At first, falling in love and entrusting one’s soul in the Sheikh’s care is essential. Once that trust and reciprocal love is developed the Sheikh may be harsh and confront the ego in a very direct way, breaking down idols and ideologies that the ego may cling to. The illuminated presence of the Sheikh, his effortless Beingness, and authenticity inspires the dervish and calls them to sit in the same transparency, which is when they begin to see all aspects of themselves. In surrendering to the care of the spiritual physician, the dervish begins the work that will lead to an understanding and experience of Oneness.

The relationship with the Sheikh is central to the Sufi journey. Entering dervishhood requires that one surrenders to the care of the spiritual physician. The dervish waits at the doorstep for the hand of the Sheikh. Once he *takes hand* he is led through an opened door, which is a threshold from being to non-being and then to nondual Self-realization. Entering dervishhood is a significant turning point in the co-researcher’s journeys, as the path accelerates from this point onwards. Rumi’s advice

rings true for these five individuals, that “whoever enters the Way without a guide will take a hundred years to travel a two-day journey.”

### **“Know Thyself”: Polishing the Mirror of the Heart**

Dear friend, your heart is a polished mirror, you must wipe it clean of the veil of dust that has gathered upon it, because it is destined to reflect the light of divine secrets.

Al-Ghazzali, The Essential Sufism

The Delphic oracle “Know Thyself” appears as a recurring theme across the spectrum of the world’s spiritual and contemplative traditions. The Sufis take the prophetic saying in which Muhammad states “He who knows himself knows his Lord” to incarnate the same wisdom that was revealed to the Ancient Greeks. In Sufism, self-knowledge requires one to embark on a journey, which begins with the lower layers of the self, the *nafs*. The journey entails cleansing and purifying those layers until one reaches the higher self, and finally Selfhood, which is the ultimate goal of the path. Since the nature of the human being is such that the Divine substance is mysteriously located at its core, the goal in Sufism “is to make manifest the hidden secret of your substance” (Chittick, 1983, p. 68). In order to manifest this inner substance the heart must become polished and clear; it is then that the Divine secrets will be revealed to the Self. What does it mean to polish the mirror of the heart, and how does one go about doing this?

In the prophetic tradition there is very clear instruction on how to polish the heart, Muhammad stated, “there is a polish for everything that takes away rust; and the polish of the heart is *dhikr*, the invocation of God” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 102). *Dhikr*, translated as Divine remembrance, comprises the Divine names and litanies from the Qur’an, the revealed and sacred text of the Sufis. The *dhikr* formula that is most

frequently used to polish the heart is *la ilaha illa-llah*. The Arabic *la ilaha illa-llah* is the first statement of the *shahadah*, the testimony of faith, and denotes the oneness of God. Typically translated, as “there is no god but God,” in the Sufi tradition, it is also understood to mean, “there is no reality but Divine reality.” In the Qur’an one of the names used of God is *al-haqq*, which can mean “the True” or “the Real.” When God is understood as *al-haqq*, an understanding that is emphasized by the Sufis, by stating the *shahadah* one essentially affirms that “there is no *haqq* but *al-haqq*,” which is to say, “there is only the Truth” or “there is only the Real.” This particular Sufi understanding of the *shahadah* is vividly apparent in the writings of Rumi. In his most famous work, the *Mathnawi*, he says, “[first] He said *No god*, then He said *but God*: *No* became *but God* and Oneness blossomed forth” (Chittick, 1983, p. 182). Rumi negates an illusory reality to affirm what is truly real, and what is truly real is God alone in His Eternal Unity.

As the Sufi begins the invocation they move away from the world, and the identity that is substantiated by the world. They are able to begin listening within. The invocation of *la ilaha illa-llah* is a sacred mantra, an elixir that brings the human being to Oneness. It heals the fissures within the fragmented psyche. The *dhikr* brings Oneness to the human being at all levels, for the mind, body and soul, and returns the human being to their original state, their primordial nature of Oneness, known as *tawhid*<sup>12</sup>. Everything becomes integrated into the center of the human being, as the self becomes aligned with the Divine Self and returns to its Original nature. The act of *dhikr* is often accompanied by physical movements, as the practitioner recites *la ilaha*, she turns to her right, away from the heart in negation of the false idols of the world. This is followed by a leftward

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<sup>12</sup> *Tawhid* is better known to translate as unification and is used to denote the Unity of Divine reality.

movement that is directed inward towards the heart, as one affirms, *illah-illah*, “but God” or “only God.” This physical motion symbolizes a sweeping or a polishing, since it is recognized by the invoker that the heart will be cleansed and polished by the invocation as one turns her attention, sincerely focused, on the Real or the Ultimate Self.

The first component of the *dhikr, la ilaha*, when one turns away from the heart, is as noted, a negation of the world. The word *ilah*, “god” represents a false or illusory reality, and can refer to any worldly object of devotion. As such, it may take on the function of a deity or Divine co-partner that blurs the vision of God’s Unity. Power, fame and attachments to money or other material objects may, when they become objects of devotion, become precisely those deities that the *shahadah* negates. To negate what is not God is, from a Sufi perspective, to ensure that God will not be confused with these lesser ‘deities,’ and these lesser deities can be just about anything in the world. “And we have many other idols within ourselves,” writes Rumi, “such as greed, self-will, spite, and envy, and we obey them all” (Chittick, 1983, p. 152). Chittick (1983), Rumi’s foremost translator in English, reiterates for the reader the point Rumi is making when he writes, “nothing is real but the Real. Everything we see and imagine as real is a false reality, a false divinity; and beyond all these things and all vision and imagination is the true Reality, the One God” (p. 181).

The rust on the heart is symbolically the idols, false identities and harmful ego states that arise from identifying with matter alone. In this state the self has forgotten its Divine origin, and tends to identify itself with empirical existence. In this state of forgetfulness one grows in one’s attachments to worldly objects and external identifications; an identity that is substantiated by one’s role in the world. Rumi writes,



Man identifies himself with his ego and is unaware of the ocean of the Spirit that lies just below the foam of his awareness. If man can pass beyond the veil of his own ego, his spirit can rejoin its original state of purity and unity. (Chittick, 1983, p. 70)

Through the act of Divine remembrance the heart-mirror is symbolically cleansed of the rust and encrustation of the ego that veils and clouds one's perception of Reality. The Sufis believe that our original state or primordial nature, which is called *fitra* is one of purity as well as unity.

For the co-researchers, polishing the mirror of their heart, through prayer and *dhikr*, is a very important part of their journey. For Waliye the human being is a "vessel for the creative force." The true Self, our Divine origin, can "only be expressed through ourselves, it can only be understood through ourselves and only be found within ourselves." The *dhikr* as well as other practices such as prayer, allow us to achieve this realization. Waliye describes the heart as "the center within" and the *dhikr* as "a ladder that we draw on" in order to arrive at this center. He reflects,

You start with the form of merely using *la illaha illallah*, there is no god but God, so that's the focal point. If you're truly in the *dhikr* that is all you hear in your head and that's all you're expressing with your mouth, and if it's being done right that's all the mind is busy with that's all the mind sees so it's focusing, it's drawing that particular power into one central point. It's not scattered in all sorts of thoughts in all sorts of business...so the idea is that we put all of that in one central point so it becomes a concentrated energy.

Waliye notes that there is so little stability within people and within the world because “we are not singularly focused beings like our creator is.” The *dhikr* allows the human being to become more of a true reflection of the Divine reality. The *dhikr* takes one through the many layers of the *nafs*, starting with the lowest rungs of the human being. The tyrannical *nafs*, the lowest and most instinctual aspect of the negative ego, is easily pulled and swayed by emotion and desire. Waliye describes this first level of the *nafs* as follows,

We just fall into one thing after another after another with very little recollection of the moments and the beings we were in those moments before, and we have no perception of what we will be next. We just fall into them according to the whims of the situation and the whims of whatever desires happen to come up in us... and so we are just ships without rotors sailing on the whims of emotions.

Waliye explains that as he invokes the sacred verse *la illaha illa-llah*, he moves into greater states of being. He recalls becoming more self-observant, aware and able to see what drives his behavior. He comments that the *dhikr* has the function of “training your ego to become a partner in the journey of the esoteric, or the journey inward, [through the *dhikr*] the ego starts to listen, it becomes a servant of the soul as opposed to its opponent.” As the ego becomes tempered, all of the outward desires of the ego become inward, as the ego becomes a friend of the Soul. Waliye remarks that all of the disciplinary practices, the *dhikr* and the ritual prayer bring the soul to the point where it becomes the master and in which “the inward depths of it all becomes intensified.” However, Waliye notes that this might happen only if the aspirant has sincerity and truthfulness in their approach to their practice. Waliye adds,

Realization depends on your sincerity with which you approach your practices that allows you to progress. Truthfulness towards oneself is so important and it's not the practices it's the effect of your own view of those practices that allow them to resonate within yourself and that gives birth to a greater truth.

For Waliye realization comes through sincere practice and “truthfulness towards oneself.” In this last passage from Waliye he describes the veils that begin to lift from the heart's mirror and the clarity that ensues,

A veil being lifted, I mean, it's a metaphor, it's not like there are a whole bunch of curtains in front of you. The lifting of a veil is a clarity, right, so each veil that lifts metaphorically allows a clarity, so one sees the inner self more vibrant, more real, so to speak. It's very difficult to describe these things, because they're experiential they're not you know, descriptive things.

As Waliye polished the mirror of his heart, through sincere *dhikr* and prayer, he began to perceive his more vibrant and real self. He explains that metaphors like “polishing the mirror of the heart” may sound elusive and austere, but only approximate an explanation of the transformation that unfolds along this journey. Waliye finally experienced the Divine Self at the seat of his heart, which he refers to in this next passage as his center or his *kaba*. He explains,

The God that lives within us is the same God that lives within everything and is now focused to the center. So in the *dhikr* we are kind of doing *tawaf* around an imaginary *kaba* and the *kaba* is always the focal point of where God is, it's always the center, it's our heart.

In this vignette Waliye uses the analogy of circumambulation around the *kaba*, which is the meaning of *tawaf*, for what happens during the *dhikr* ceremony. During the ceremony everyone moves counter clockwise around the “House of God.” This counter clockwise motion is itself significant; it symbolizes undoing the effects of the “Fall” – both from Heaven above, as well as from the Divine Center within. Through the circumambulation one attempts to return to the primordial state of human perfection in which the human being stood before the Divine in a state of complete Realization.

For Janan, the undoing of the fall requires commitment and submission. Janan speaks about the importance of the formal ritual prayer that is performed five times a day. The ritual prayer requires a meditative focus and a one-pointedness. In the ritual prayer there are Qur’anic litanies that are recited and a series of prostrations that are performed. Janan points out that in the prayer, the prostration is the most elevated state of the human being because it is an inversion that symbolizes the subduing and submission of the ego. Janan explains,

The inversion is about taking the hot head and making the heart the hot place and making the head the cool place and bringing the heart higher than the head um, and this is because we get into these places of relying too much on information and um, intellectual argument, and it is a place where we can definitely trip up, and so the heart is the place where we encounter our Divine identity.

Janan describes the effect of the *dhikr* and the prayer as allowing one to come into contact with their Divine identity. In Sufism our primordial identity, *fitra*, is what we strive to return to, it is our authentic self and the place that guidance and wisdom comes from. The final goal of these religious practices is to unlock the inner substance of the

self. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, a prominent scholar on Islamic mysticism writes, “The famous dictum of Christ that the Kingdom of God is within you is likewise a confirmation of the primacy of the inward journey towards the Ultimate Self as the final goal of religion” (1977, p. 322). In other words, the inward journey is necessary to realize Ultimate Selfhood, and prayer offers a means for this awakening.

By contemplating at the heart level, one may open up this place of truth and begin to interpret the world based on a deeper reading. As one begins to polish the heart-mirror, the many dogmas and rules, or laws that are upheld, are revealed to have deeper meanings. In this next passage Janan reflects on the function of these laws and how they come to us out of love and benefit for self-transformation, and not as a measure of one’s morality. She explains,

One can go on about sexual politics and all these kinds of things, we have to examine deeply the difference between morality and love, you know, and the mystic knows the difference because morality is a code, an outside practice, and like any practice it’s very important for us to understand that to come into contact with this sacred place there are certain things and ways of acting that will distract us, that will cause an interference and that is the reason why those things are better left avoided, but it is not because inherently they sully your contract with God to go to heaven.

As Janan began the inward journey, contemplating truth and listening to the guidance of her heart, she was moved beyond a more exoteric reading of religious law. Her heart became an inner compass that guided her on her journey towards her Divine identity. She explains that as the heart expands, through the *dhikr*, it “becomes a guiding principle.”

She warns that it is sometimes difficult to know “what is the heart speaking and what is our neurosis.” Janan explains that she can tell her ego from her heart by the degree of expansion or clenching within her being. She explains that if we feel the clenching and the closing of the heart then “we are going in the wrong direction, or a misguided direction at any rate, it won’t hold truth...” For Janan the polish of the *dhikr* opens the heart and allows it to hold greater truth, as one begins to experience a more expanded self beyond the restrictions of the ego. In this next passage Janan speaks metaphorically about how the heart, in order to open and be a receptacle for truth, needs first to be tuned like a stringed instrument. Once the instrument is tuned, in this case, the instrument of the heart, it will sound and can be sounded in its truth. She reflects,

Truthfulness has to be cultivated through the *dhikr*, so even just recognizing that, what is that place, it’s a very fine-tuning it’s a real knowledge of just how that string has to really sound. It’s an authentic sound and once we’ve tasted it we do tend to recognize it more and again.... I’ve really ah, tuned the opening of my heart to a truth that is of honesty and it takes a degree of ruthlessness and painfulness to keep it open because there is not a single truth. It’s constantly evolving ah, revealing itself into that 360 degrees of truth.

Janan speaks about tuning her heart to the sound of truth, in order that her development may continue in an authentic direction. In this vignette, Janan mentions the 360 degrees of truth. When asked about the meaning of this statement Janan explains a circle is 360 degrees and that although Truth is one-pointed in its essence we see it manifest in multiple ways in the world. When we encounter the world there are many truths that sit at any point on this circle of 360 degrees, which are all tied to the same essence. This

understanding is elucidated in the Qur’anic verse that reads, “Wherever you turn there is the face of God” (2:109), which is to say that truth is in every direction we just have to tune our hearts to see it.

Rashid speaks about the same shift in perspective, one that has allowed him to see things with more beauty and clarity. He explains,

The *dhikr* teaches that nothing external needs to change, it’s just the way you perceive things. Once you invoke and polish your heart of the rust that clouds your perception you start to have a beautiful lens through which to see things, and then you can appreciate simple things, a sunny day. It’s gratitude, but it’s also something deeper, you know, without being able to be grateful for these beautiful moments. What would be the point of living without being able to reflect on those beautiful moments and see the meaning of those beautiful moments and the teaching behind these experiences. I found this perspective in *la illaha illallah*.

Rashid adds that it is through the “repetition of *la illaha illallah* that it makes sense of all my experiences, it integrates them all through a oneness or centeredness.” As one begins to polish the heart-mirror, old ways of thinking and perceiving start to fall away and one can see things through the illumination of the Beloved. Shabistari, a 12<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint writes, “Go you, sweep out the dwelling room of your heart prepare it to be the home of the Beloved. When you go out, He will come in. Within you, when you are free from self, He will show His beauty” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 102). At this stage in the journey the co-researchers begin to lose some of the limitations imposed by the ego and make room, an opening, for the Beloved to enter.

Nuriyana speaks about the “pedagogy of the heart”, the teaching of the heart that becomes known and illuminated through the *dhikr*. The heart teaches about the true self, which is one’s true identity beyond the superficial identities that get constructed in the world. She also describes the corruption and deceit of our socialization in the world. She explains,

What the modern world does is a complete violence to the soul, you’re socialized to pursue who you are, your authenticity, by what you can claim from outside, right, from getting a degree from a University, from your social circle, you know, it disconnects you from who you are, it’s a splitting of who you are, you maybe only understand yourself at the level of value that you’ve derived from the outside. Your skill set is measured by your profession and by your worldly pursuits and there’s nothing wrong with that but the thing is that there’s nothing that acknowledges the depth of the soul, right, which is where we *actually* reside.

Nuriyana’s journey required a complete and utter break from the world. This allowed her to go into the place where she could meet God within herself. She explains, “you leave the world and you join God, where you’re in the presence of God. You seek sustenance from God and complete humility in his Loving mercy.” In other words, Nuriyana claims that our true identity is revealed to us when we turn away from the world and look deep inside of ourselves for what can become known to us. She remarks that with all of the validation one is taught to seek from the outside world it makes the inward journey “futile, ridiculous, almost as if it’s anachronistic.” We are taught “that for every ailment there is a solution that is external to you”, and that knowledge is only gained through certain means “You have to have read it, you have to have predicted it, hypothesized it



and tested it etcetera.” Nuriyana feels that through the *dhikr* one can start to receive knowledge from beyond one’s worldly experiences and intellectual training through tremendous spiritual discipline. She reflects on the difficulty of this process,

The *dhikr* is a gift and an invitation from God to move deeply within, um, and it’s very hard, it’s the hardest thing to do, it is easier to get a PhD. Oh, it is so much easier to become a doctor or a lawyer, to get wealthy, you know, but, to be alone with yourself, and try to figure out what’s going on inside. It’s like there is every element in the world that ensures that you never sit in your sorrow, that you never contemplate who you are, that you never experience a tremendous amount of introspection. It is always about being triumphant in the world outside and making that world outside natural to you, known to you... but so much is lost, everything is lost in that façade.

For Nuriyana introspection is almost antithetical to the world we live in today. There are so many distractions and stimuli that cause us to be entertained or pacified that we never “sit in our sorrow” and really contemplate *who* we are. At this stage in Nuriyana’s journey she has made a sincere intention to look deeply within. In this process she negates the outside world as false and illusory in order to enliven her inner world, which for Nuriyana, is a source of Truth. Nuriyana quotes a famous supplication by the Prophet, who calls to God “oh Allah help me see things as they truly are.” She comments that what needs to be seen is not what is most apparent but what is beyond the appearance of things. As the heart begins to awaken through the *dhikr*, it acts as a navigating device allowing the individual to “see what needs to be seen” beyond what is obvious.

Nuriyana uses the analogy of mining for the *dhikr*, which acts to bring her closer to her true self. She explains, “look at the analogy of the world, of these exquisite minerals and everything that is precious is very difficult to get to and in fact it’s the tremendous toil that leads you to a gem.” The spiritual path requires this kind of rigorous searching inside of oneself to arrive at Spirit. The inner mining that happens through the *dhikr* breaks down the encrustation that has formed over the heart. It can be said that the ego is the shell that needs to be penetrated in order to uncover the glowing jewels that are the felicitous transcendent states of realization. Entering the door of the sacred heart through the *dhikr* awakens an inner consciousness. Nuriyana explains,

Its sort of like the onion layer, you peel it you peel it, you peel it to get to the core, but when you’re moving in the direction, towards your inner heart that very, you know, that very mystical location and it’s a mandatory journey because that is the space that you move to meet God, in the Now, that is the only place where you meet Allah, right, so there’s a deep sense that there’s something lying in there that isn’t being um, polished, that’s not being accessed.

Nuriyana has used many analogies to explain this process of interiorization. In her last analogy she speaks about the effects of *dhikr* as a bypass surgery that opens and expands the heart. She adds that one may not realize the effect of the *dhikr* until some time because it works on a very subtle level.

Nuriyana also speaks about the effects that the *dhikr* had in giving her centrality, and feeling more integrated,

I noticed the integration, that everything was being integrated and that I was able to hold to some Center. It was as if a Center was forming in my heart, and I felt

more self awareness, a heart awareness, and then I felt that there was something being cemented around my heart, and was Centering my experiences, and that it was inviolable. I couldn't break it. There was an irreversibility, the *dhikr* was forming and cementing... it was cementing a core and that core was integrating everything in my life into a center, like it was just pulling it all in.

For Nuriyana, *dhikr* was a gateway that led her to uncover her true source and reality in Spirit. She believes that her polished heart will resonate with primordial wisdom when it hears it. Similarly, Janan alluded to the heart as an 'instrument of perception' that can become finely attuned to Truth.

The co-researchers have used many analogies in an attempt to approximate the sense of what it means to polish the mirror of the heart. Fouad speaks about the process of traversing the layers of consciousness in order to arrive at the polished heart. He uses the analogy of an orange in the following passage,

It's like an orange, you have the peel that you need to take off. Then you might have the rind, you might still have something accrued or it might be dirty or something like that, and each of these levels is not the final state. The soul and the core is there, but to taste it and to understand it, you have to first deal with this rind, you have to deal with the everyday self, the ego, and all of things that are part of your natural defenses. You're dealing in a day to day world with everybody else, and you're competing in this world, um, those levels of the self are not necessary evil or antagonistic but they are part of the world, and they can be distractive on the spiritual path, you know, but anger does have its place, lust has its place, but all these things are not proper for the soul, in that we start to see

these things for what they are and you learn how to deal with them and that they have their proper modes of expression.

Fouad explains that his *dhikr* practice has allowed him to become more conscious of himself, more aware of his actions in the moment. He is able to observe his thought process and his emotions as they come and go without giving added energy to them. He explains, “being conscious that you’re in the moment and that your actions are not robotic, that you’re not doing things while forgetting what you’re doing.” For Fouad this had a tremendous impact on his interactions with others. As he began to clear the rust from his heart through the *dhikr*, he began to learn more about his true, Divine identity.

The calm and centered state he would cultivate in the *dhikr* was something he was trying to bring into his life on a daily basis. His intention was to stay consistent with what he knew of his higher self and to stop behaviors that were destructive or negative by telling himself “I’m behaving in a way that is not consistent with myself.” The outcome of this practice was restorative, as many of the fractured relationships with his family members were healing. Fouad had experienced a turbulent relationship with his family, however, as he became more centered through the *dhikr*, his relationships improved. He notes, “I remember being able to be more patient with my parents and more understanding of them and more tolerant of them and things improved definitely with them.” The *dhikr* brought a state of clarity and awareness to Fouad, and he could feel the marked difference of when he was “unconscious of the Divine” which he characterized as being “rusty.”

The *dhikr* also helped Fouad breakdown many of the mental constructs he upheld about his “worldly” identity as well as many negative mental constructs he had about the nature of God. He remarks,

The sense people have of God being a tyrant is nothing but human psychology and is just us internalizing our own egos and putting that in the place of God, you know, who’s angry and who’s destructive and whose demonic? Where do these fears come from? From within ourselves... I have always had this issue of this symbolic anthropomorphic image of God as a tyrant but then through the *dhikr* I experienced God as merciful and loving.

In this passage Fouad describes how he projected his own shadow aspects onto the face of God, and for many years God’s nature was defined by his fixed concepts. Through the *dhikr* Fouad was able to move past the anthropomorphized depictions of the Divine and come into a more expansive and encompassing understanding of Truth.

As Fouad became more acquainted with his true self other distortions about himself and others began to fall away. He would often feel overcome with loving and compassionate feelings for himself and for others. Fouad remarks that during the *dhikr* he would feel “more real” than himself, indicating the illumination of his true self. He reflects, “what I’ve come to understand is that the Divine soul is inside you and it’s always with you, it’s not really inside you in a tangible materially way, it’s a form of awareness of which you are sometimes aware”

The fifth theme in the Sufi journey is about the co-researchers deepening their inward journey. This inward journey is supported by traditional practices, including personal *dhikr*, prayer and communal *dhikr*. With the guidance of the Sheikh and the

sincere efforts from the dervish, something of the true self begins to emerge as the inner reality of the dervish becomes illuminated. The transpersonal psychologists Walsh & Vaughan (1983), write about the universal prescription of the inner search that come from both the Eastern and the Western spiritual traditions. They write,

Christianity teaches that ‘the kingdom of God is within you’, Buddhism says, ‘look within, thou art the Buddha’, in the language of Siddha Yoga, ‘God dwells within you as you.’ In Hinduism, ‘Atman and Brahman are one. In Islam, ‘he who knows himself knows his lord’ in every great tradition, self-knowledge is an integral part of the path to transcendental wisdom or universal consciousness. (p. 20)

The co-researchers have all confirmed this need to turn inward and embark on the inner journey towards realizing “transcendental wisdom and universal consciousness.” The *dhikr*, which is figuratively described as ‘polishing the mirror of the heart’ is meant to purify the soul of its vices and diseases that cause the human being to ‘forget’ who they are. These vices also cause the human being to identify solely with matter, and their function/role in the world. Through the *dhikr* the aspirant experiences an expansion of their being, beyond their ordinary self-concepts. As their hearts expand the co-researchers’ develop a sense of greater beauty, love and compassion for themselves and for others. Rumi writes, “Behold the garden of the heart, green and fresh and new, full of rosebuds and cypress and jasmine” (Chittick, 1983, p. 282).

The one-pointed meditation on *la illaha illa llah* draws the dervish inward to one-pointedness and the invocation has an alchemical effect on their being. A deep sense of integration within oneself is experienced, as one is able to reconcile compartmentalized

or “split off” aspects of the psyche. The sincerity with which the *dhikr* is approached enables the aspirant to reflect, with greater clarity, on the Divine essence at their core. At this stage there is a realization that the Divine spark is located within. The heart-center or the true *Kaba* is precisely where one’s Divine identity is located. Thus, the remembrance of God, the *dhikr*, is done with a focus on the Center wherein God resides. The *dhikr* begins a process of *interiorization*, turning away from the world and joining God at one’s Center. The co-researchers have rejected the world as false or illusory, and there is a negation of all things besides their inner world. The duality of inner, outer or form and formlessness is very pronounced at this phase in the co-researchers’ journeys.

### **Divine Witnessing: Unveiling the Self Beyond the Ego**

This outward spring and garden are the reflection of the inward garden: the whole of this world is a single nugget, and the inward is the mine.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, *The Essential Sufism*

The Sufi journey culminates in union with the Divine in which the duality of Thou and I dissolves in Oneness. This sixth theme marks another step closer in that Realization. The term ‘Divine witnessing’ (*mushadadah*) refers to perceiving the outward as a reflection of the inward, and to know that in both inner and outer worlds one can witness the presence of the Divine. As one moves closer to the realization of Oneness more inclusive and integrated levels of consciousness are revealed.

Traditionally the Sufis explain the distance from Oneness metaphorically in terms of the layers of veils that sit before one’s perception. These veils are figuratively spoken of as preventing one from seeing “things as they are.” There is a prophetic saying in which Muhammad stated “God has veiled himself in seventy thousand veils of light.” Carl Ernst (1997), a scholar of Sufism explains, that this very process of union with the

Divine is “experienced as a progressive unveiling of those luminous barriers” (p. xii). When the veils start to fall away the world becomes illuminated with the Light of the Divine, and the Divine is witnessed in all things. The Sufis consider the veils to be anything that distract and delude us from being in the perfect state of nondual Being. The aim of Sufi practice is to clear away the veils from the heart, which act to cloud our perception. The veils are the attachments to selfhood, supported by the ego, that prevent the realization of Ultimate Selfhood. Once the veils are lifted the innermost consciousness, (*sirr-e-sirr*), is revealed to the heart, and one perceives *in* and *through* the Divine reality.

‘Divine witnessing’ captures a shift in one’s perception and experience of the world. According to Sufism the world can be experienced as heaven or hell depending on one’s inner state. James Faidman and Robert Frager, two scholars of Sufi psychology write, “This world is a place to taste the nectar of paradise and also to feel the coals of hell” (1997, p. 73). The world can be experienced as a source of suffering, loss and ultimately a hellish reality depending on what veils have been lifted and what veils remain. Alternatively, heaven is perceived when we “serve one another, and become the instruments for one another’s inner growth” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 73). In our service to others we are participating in the interdependent reality of existence, and acknowledge our *embeddedness* in the Oneness of creation. As we are freed from the limitations and the alienation of the separate self, a more holistic vision of our reality is revealed, a reality that is marked by *interdependence*.

In the previous theme the co-researchers elucidated the process of *interiorization*, through the *dhikr*, in which their inner world was illuminated and their connection to the



Divine was substantiated. This was achieved through a negation of the external world, and an affirmation of their 'inner' reality. Clearly, the co-researchers were caught in a duality as they felt the world was a barrier for Self-realization. However, in this sixth theme the co-researchers begin to perceive the external world as a mirror for the Divine. The world is no longer perceived as a threat or a barrier for realization. As Faidman and Frager write, "The world no longer stands between us and God, unless we put it there" (1997, p. 73). In 'Divine witnessing' all of existence become Divine theophanies that reflect the perfect Reality. Abu Bakr Al-Siddiq, a disciple of the Prophet from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, said "I have never seen anything, except that I saw the face of God before it", which articulates the awareness that has been developed in this theme.

The co-researchers experience a shift in awareness from independent to *interdependent* being, and from a negation of the world to a validation and an integration of one's experiences of the world. In the previous theme Nuriyana spoke about her need to negate the world in order to deepen her inward journey, which acts to facilitate the awakening of her true self. However, as she continued in her invocation her perception of the world was transformed. A more integrated understanding of reality was illuminated to her. In our conversation she recognized that she held a very Cartesian, "I think therefore I am" epistemology in which "the human subject is the center for making meaning and interpreting the world." She explained that this Cartesian worldview has "negated God in the world and moved us away from an enchantment with the world, and that we are literally violently disconnected from having a connection with the world other than having to conquer it." Nuriyana felt that she had been operating on a similar premise by negating the world and not approaching it as a sacred entity. She explains that she was

greatly influenced by the Cartesian worldview in which “nature becomes devoid of any Being or any consciousness, you know, of any symbiotic relationship, of any sense that is in conversation with you.” She continues in her explanation by speaking about individualism, and that when we only affirm a sacred location within ourselves, we reinforce the illusion of individuality. She adds,

The modern world has created a disenchantment with each other, with the other, with the world, and the natural outcome is façade. It’s the corruption of the soul, it is the anxiety, it is the feeling of the stranger, the danger and threat of the other that needs to, at all times be in competition with us, that we need to be suspicious of.

Kabir Helminski, a Sufi Sheikh and psychologist writes about this very point, when he explains, “what occupies our attention is a fiction... we live a life of delusion, of separation, of selfishness, of loneliness. Behind our sadness and anxiety is a simple lack of love, which translates into a lack of meaning and purpose” (1999, p. 37). Helminski is emphasizing that the disconnection one feels with others and the world “outside” of oneself creates tremendous suffering for the human being. Since the fundamental reality of the human being is one of interconnection, it is only natural that one will yearn to realize this state, and suffer without its realization. Nuriyana recalls experiencing a “realignment with the world” as she continued in her invocation. In this “realignment” all of the aspects of her ordinary, mundane existence were being elevated to a Divine understanding. Everything in her life began to emanate and connect vertically and there was no longer room for horizontal connections. She explains,

What was once separate, like you know like the spiritual world is distinct from you know going to Fortinos and shopping, became connected and is integrated into that Center. There is no secular, everything becomes sacred, every interaction becomes sacred, every experience becomes sacred, even the silence becomes sacred and the stillness becomes sacred. There is no space outside of God.

For Nuriyana the understating that “there is no space outside of God” has allowed her to integrate all of her mundane experiences into a living sacred reality. At this stage in her realization the world is no longer a threat or a distraction. She remarks that when you can see “the meaning behind the form and know that every form is delivered by God, that is freedom.” Freedom is often understood to be a set of liberal codes related to human rights and as having agency in the world. In this context Nuriyana is speaking about freedom from a spiritual perspective which is “the ability to see God in everything through everything, and in every encounter you have.” Regarding this point Jami, a 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint has written, “When you see beauty and perfection in this world, it is nothing but a sign of Him. A beautiful creature is merely a single blossom from the vast garden of God” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 74). For Nuriyana the world is a “whole integrated system”, and that its fundamental reality is interdependence. She remarks that everything in this universe is part of the same primordial nature, “it’s in the face of every tree, it’s in the eyes of every animal, and it’s from the same source.” Nuriyana began to feel a greater affinity with the natural world, developing a special relationship with trees. The trees, she states, “ would take my negative energy, and out of unconditional love, return and restore me.” She found that there was healing in her connection to the natural world. She reflects,

What I realized was that the drama and the level of neurosis and psychosis that we feel, has a remedy in our connection with the natural world, and that the natural world was placed here by God as refuge for all of our negative energy. It sucks it and it releases to us a restorative positive energy, we're healed in it.

For Nuriyana the sense of being deeply interconnected to her surroundings, to others and to the natural world, was immensely healing. Nature became a therapeutic element in her life. It was also a source of inspiration as she recalls contemplating the beauty of a single rose, which would appear for Nuriyana as a *theophany*, or a sign pointing her to the Divine.

Sufism understands the world as a manifestation of God. To the extent that it mirrors the Divine, everything in it contains the Divine essence. In Sufi poetry and teaching stories, nature is used as a medium for contemplating the Truth of existence. Take for example the experience of watching a flower bud, bloom and then fade and die. This process exhibits the very truth of the cycle of impermanence, which when contemplated over, can be a useful practice in letting go of suffering caused by our attachment to manifest existence. To this point Rumi writes,

Every form that you see has its original in the Divine world. If the form passes away, it is of no consequence, because its original was from eternity. Be not grieved that every form that you see, every mystical saying that you have heard will pass away. The fountainhead is always bringing forth water. (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 111)

Rumi advises to go to the fountainhead, the source and everlasting sustenance, which always brings forth water. In other words, the impermanence of the world does not

denote finitude, but points to a transition into a greater reality. Rumi asserts that behind every temporal form is its permanent reality in essence. Therefore, the beauty of contemplating the impermanence of the flower is that it mirrors the human observer's own impermanent nature, marking an interconnectedness or a shared nature between the two.

Fouad began to experience the same sense of interconnectedness with the natural world as Nuriyana. He recalls feeling part of the "whole organic nature of reality" of this "living breathing being." Fouad expressed the same sentiments as Nuriyana; that this sense of interconnectedness is tremendously healing. He reflects,

What causes you to feel alienated is precisely because you think you are different from everyone else, that you have an independent consciousness, and are fundamentally disconnected, when in fact you are part of the same essence as everyone else, and you're all connected through that essence.

For Fouad the awareness of being part of a greater whole helped him to integrate aspects of his life that were previously disconnected.

I used to feel that my spiritual quest was very alien from these other parts of my life, studying in school, relating to people, my work, but now I don't see these other parts as discontinuous. It is all a spiritual experience, and I'm better able to be at peace in the moment with what I'm doing. It's more holistic now.

As Fouad integrated aspects of his life that were once compartmentalized he became more harmonized within his being. He began to feel less isolated and disconnected from others. He notes, "we have different faces and different names, but our souls relate." Sufism holds to a belief that human souls existed in pre-eternity. Fouad had read and

understood this point conceptually, however this was becoming an experiential reality as he began to realize the interconnectedness of humanity as one spiritual family. Another very prominent sensitivity Fouad developed was compassion for others. He was able to relate to other's suffering and began to involve himself in volunteerism and humanitarian services.

The final point of Fouad's experience of this theme is his ability to reconcile the question of religious diversity. Having a Christian background, and an interest in many Eastern traditions before settling on the practices in Sufism, he often wondered how he would reconcile all of the different traditions. In 'Divine witnessing' Fouad was able to see that all religions point to the same meaning. A veil was thus lifted in his perception, as he saw that these different religious and spiritual perspectives were all ways of approximating one Truth. He states, "Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, Moses, they were all teaching from the same Divine source, and that is obviously true, what -- is there another God? (laugh). If it was divided then God would be schizophrenic (laughs)." At this stage in the journey Fouad is able to integrate and reconcile the aspects of his life, and even theological concepts he had struggled with for many years. Even the duality in his practice in Sufism, the exoteric laws, rites, rituals and practices and the inner meanings that spring forth from the heart-center were reconciled. He reflects,

The esoteric is not in combat or in opposition to the exoteric, the esoteric both explains and gives spiritual meaning to the exoteric, and yet the exoteric exists as a way of transmission. It's a way of transmitting that essential truth, its like why does a walnut just come out without the shell? The fruit doesn't exist without the flower or the plant that bears it.

For Fouad it is clear that there is a reciprocal relationship between form and meaning or the physical and the spiritual. The physical is a gateway into the spiritual and the spiritual is the life force infusing and enlivening the physical. Therefore, one or the other cannot be discarded. The Heart Sutra, which is an ancient Buddhist text, articulates this correspondence when it states, “form is not different from emptiness, emptiness is not different from form.” The sutra continues with a dialectic juggling that aims to break down the duality created between the two ideas of existence and non-existence. The purpose of this verse is to bring the practitioner to a heightened sense of understanding, to move towards the experience of a non-conceptual awareness of emptiness, free from the discursive intellect. In this passage emptiness and form are shown to be dependent on one another, which is a paradox in itself. This is why knowledge of this paradox only comes through direct experience, and cannot be understood in its fullness through the intellect. The sutra states that *form* is not different from emptiness, and emptiness is not different from *form*. This is because they are bound to one another, through form emptiness is perceived, and out of emptiness form arises.

In this theme the veils that were shed for Janan shifted her perception away from the same exoteric, esoteric dualism. She found that either dismissing the esoteric because it is not tangible, or discarding the exoteric because it is not “as spiritual” is a result of being caught in a duality. This duality often elevates one aspect above the other, and is without balance or harmony. When referring to the exoteric and esoteric dimensions, she notes that “they are both exactly the same thing.” She points to this by recalling her experience in Nepal, when the sense of the spiritual was woven into every aspect of life, however mundane or excessively ritualistic it seemed. For Janan the simple fact that we

all breathe is our access to the Divine in each moment. It is our direct link to the sacred, and what constitutes as spiritual. She comments,

We can live a certain amount of time without food, and a certain amount of time without water, but we cannot exist without the breath not even at all. We have infinitely different stories and histories and personal things that give us this tremendous diversity of human beings, but we are completely connected through the breath and through death. We have two things that we will all ultimately completely experience, so there has to be, in my mind, something that is profoundly mystical about those two things and I never, ah, moved too far away from those two, another way of looking at it is in inhalation, exhalation.

For Janan, the contemplation on death and the breath are two important facets of her practice that have brought her to a greater state of realization. In this vignette Janan has highlighted the fundamental connection all creatures have to these two aspects of existence. Janan emphasizes the breath-work intrinsic in the *dhikr*. She speaks about breath and death metaphorically as inhalation and exhalation, and that in each moment there is an exhalation, or a death, followed by an inhalation, which is the breath of rebirth marking yet another opportunity for realization.

In the following passage, Janan quotes from a Rumi poem called *One Song*. In this poem Rumi expresses the longing for intimacy that our soul has for the Divine. He notes that this yearning is “one song” that we all sing, and part of the human condition that we all share. In this passage Janan also speaks about how we are all connected through this yearning, which is the calling of our souls for intimacy with the Beloved. She reflects,



All of us are very different, and we have things that separate us, we have very different life stories, different emotional palates, different things that we react to, but in the end that yearning, number one, we all share, and that joy, even if it is only for a glimpse, is inherent in the rose blooming and the birds signing and all of those wonderful moments in nature that are the same symbol of that yearning and that exaltation and celebration um, and juxtaposed with this we are extremely struggling flawed human beings but we have a song that we share and everybody has at some point written about it, knows it. Every mystical experience knows this, every great musician knows this, “we are all singing the same song”

For Janan, all of creation, the natural world, human beings, animals, all life is intimately connected through Spirit. Whether it is the expression of joy, which celebrates and exalts the Spirit, or it is the lament of the human being in their yearning for connection to Spirit, it is present in each moment. We are all yearning for wholeness, to touch joy and to have happiness. This yearning, which comes from the deepest recesses of the soul, is the calling of the soul to return to the Divine reality. In the following vignette Janan explains that the true test of life is to recognize the same fundamental yearning in others and to know we are all connected in that,

This encounter with death causes us to understand about our encounter with life, so as the world confounds us it is the indicator of our encounter with the Divine, all of it. And then Self-realization is simply coming to understand that Divine identity within, and then recognizing it in all the other people who drive us crazy!

In our experience of the world, we might perceive ourselves moving solely on a horizontal plane. According to the Sufi tradition our journey is always an expression of,

and an encounter with, the Divine, which marks a vertical movement. Every decision we make stems from a deeply rooted desire for Union, and for complete and utter unity within ourselves. For Janan, the perfection of Divine witnessing is in her ability to recognize and appreciate this same yearning in every individual.

For Waliye this stage of unveiling is crucial in his ability to “become what he has always been.” Waliye describes unveiling as a return to his primordial self, to return to his original state of unity and integration with the totality of existence. He reflects,

To achieve a greater consciousness requires the undoing of the idea of “I” and everything that clouds that or veils that if you wish. One of the misconceptions is that we have to achieve something, we have to become. This is the wrong perception, we have to undo. We don’t do, we go back to what we are or what we were in the first place. We have to stop doing, because we are not incapable of doing anything esoterically, exoterically sure we can do all kinds of stuff, but it’s pointless unless it’s giving us a real drive towards goodness in the higher sense that it really serves all of us instead of me, myself and I. It is the undoing of the perception of I, the undoing of the attachment of me, it’s the undoing of the need to do for myself, its the cessation of all of that so it’s really undressing, its not dressing.

To become ‘who we already are’ is to transcend our egocentric existence. It requires moving beyond, and away from the demands of the ego, as well as to undo one’s attachments to personal desires. By undoing the illusion of “I” Waliye experienced a deep sense of interconnectedness with all creation. This state inspires him to bring goodness and charity into the world, as one is no longer in the service of the ego. Rather, one

desires the success and wellbeing of the whole system, from the neighbor to the stranger, to the ecosystem. Waliye notes that in Divine witnessing the interconnected truth of everything, in its Unity, will become apparent. He comments,

Everything is interconnected, and the truth of everything is Unity. There is no difference between you or I other than your body and my body and even that is an illusion, but the truth, I mean the essence of all of us is the same thing, and it's only one thing, the essence of everything that exists no matter how far you go in the universe or how minuscule you want to get with the biggest telescope, its still one unified being. There is no separation and once there is the realization that there is no difference between us anymore, everything is familiar. You recognize everyone's soul because it's not you looking, it's the soul looking at another souls, our souls are interconnected, it doesn't matter what you do, you can't stop that because that's fundamentally what you are.

Waliye comments that at this stage everything and everyone becomes familiar but virtue of his or her underlying connectedness. For this reason the most important realization for him is the practice of service. He explains that on the spiritual journey what is more important than prayer, hajj and fasting is service. He exclaims, "you can't just pay service to God, he doesn't need you but service to your fellow human beings, this is necessary." He feels that the highest level of service "is done without expectation of any return, without expectation of thankfulness, and only for the sake of compassion."

Rashid's own journey echoes Waliye's almost perfectly in his emphasis of service, which arose out of a perceived interconnectedness to all things. For Rashid, taking care of the ecosystem is the greatest act of compassion, especially given the

environmental crisis we are facing today. Rashid explains that we should all consciously and actively participate in improving the environment, for its benefit and for our own. At this stage Rashid sees the natural world as a manifestation of the Divine and a revelation in its own right. The natural world is a source of spiritual inspiration because of its sacredness and Divine origin. Rashid explains, “when you witness compassion in the natural world, the mercy of the ocean that cleans and purifies itself to provide us food, to the trees and forests that provide us oxygen, we are implicated in this compassionate web of existence.” He observes that the teachings of religion are beneficial, they are meant to change our character and our awareness of how we operate in the world. However, if we do not put these teachings into practice, and there is no transformation of this kind, the teachings hold no value. He says, in reference to Islam,

The rules in the *shariah* are supposed to help us but its only the beginning, there’s an immense ocean and when you follow the *shariah* perfectly all you’re doing is walking around on the beach possibly with one toe touching the shore.

He adds, “a big mistake on this path is when you separate your everyday life from your spiritual life, they need to be integrated and seen as one in the same thing.” Rashid explains,

You can pray a thousand times a day and fast a thousand times more but this is pointless it’s empty if we’re not kind to our neighbors and we are harming our earth, our home that has been entrusted to us, if we’re heedlessly throwing away our garbage. So, this is the essence of serving the oneness, to be in the oneness is to live as if you’re neighbor was no different from you and if the birds are no different from you and ah, the ocean was no different from you and the fish...

Another insight that emerges for Rashid in this theme is non-harmful action. In many spiritual traditions non-harm is a key tenet that is implemented in one's life. Drawing upon this understanding Rashid comments,

A dervish has control of his hands, his tongue, his eyes, his genitals, etcetera so not to harm anything, not even a rock or a leaf. We should try to make every action, every thought, every word beneficial to the oneness of creation, to be servants to all of existence, from the ozone layer to the insects...

He explains that human beings have a special role in the Oneness. Although we are all joined and interconnected with the ant and the tiger for example, we have a greater capacity to care for other creatures than these creatures do. Therefore, in the multiplicity of existence, Rashid explains, our particular function as a human being is different, it is greater,

The ants and the bees have their job and they do their work, but they cannot take care of tigers. The ant has no responsibility towards a tiger, but we have a responsibility to both the ant and the tiger. We can take care of tigers, and the ants, and the ozone layer, and the mountains, and the trees. We have the capacity and the responsibility.

For Rashid, and for any Sufi, the earth is viewed as a sacred living body, and humanity is the custodian of this body and bears the responsibility of its care. By understanding the Oneness of existence, one can have a deeper understanding, for example, about the nature of sin. Rashid explains that a sin "doesn't have any function for the creation, it only harms creation." A sin, from this perspective, is something that may cause harm to oneself and to others.

Although the co-researchers have come to a conceptual understanding and a perceptual awareness of Oneness, there are still barriers that exist at this stage. Rashid notes that there is still a duality that exists in his consciousness, whereby he remains in contemplation and reflection on the Divine reality. He explains,

There's a duality in even saying that I'm going to reflect on Allah, there's a dualism there right from the beginning because that means that there's a separate self, there's a subject/object. The goal of Sufism, I believe, is non-duality, *fana/baqa*, which is to eliminate the sense of separate self.

The co-researcher's journeys continue through the last two themes in this study, mentioned here by Rashid, which are *fana* and *baqa*. These two themes are subtle gradations in the realization process that culminate in nondual Being.

In this theme the co-researchers are brought closer to the realization of Oneness. They have moved towards reconciling their *outer* and *inner* world and no longer see the external world as a threat, an illusion, or a barrier for realizing their true self. They do not negate the world, but see it as a Divine theophany, and a Divine theatre in which the manifestation and self-disclosure of God is acted out. In realizing "Divine witnessing" the whole of existence becomes illuminated. The immanence of God is tangible in every human being and in the natural world.

This stage involves the contemplation and mediation on nature, which guides the aspirant towards an experience of Oneness. The Sufi Sheikh and metaphysician Frithjof Schuon remarks, "For the sage, every star, every flower, is metaphysically a proof of the Infinite" (1992, p. 12). As one moves beyond ego consciousness the world becomes revealed in its divinity, and in its intimate connection with all phenomena. Relationships

become sacred, as the illusion of a separate self falls away and one perceives their interdependent reality. Each human being is revealed to be an instrument in one another's growth. The importance of being in the service of others comes through strongly at this juncture. In the words of the 11<sup>th</sup> century Persian Saint Sa'adi, "the path is the service of others, not prayer beads and dervish robes." At this stage the co-researchers have developed a deep sense of responsibility for being in the service of all of existence, from "the ant to the ozone layer."

### **"Die Before You Die": Burning in the Flames of Divine Love**

Between me and You there lingers an "it is I" which torments me. Ah! Lift through mercy this "it is I" from between us both!

Mansur al-Hallaj, The Essential Sufism

To 'die before death' approximates the very height of self-transformation in the Sufi journey. It is the lifting of the final veil, which is the "I," that separates us from God. According to Sufism separation from the Divine is the ultimate source of suffering, and union is the ultimate state of healing and wholeness. In order for the self to realize the Self, the self must be purified of all the attachments and limitations to selfhood caused by the ego. In this way, the self is both the greatest source and perpetuator of our pain, or the gateway to our salvation. When the veils of selfhood are lifted, cleansed and cleared, the purified *nafs*, the Spirit, remains. In Hinduism the *nafs* would be understood as *atman*, or individual consciousness. The *atman* can be pure in its realization of Brahman, or the *atman* can remain deluded by *maya*. Rumi writes about the impure aspects of the self, and how these pollutants delude us from seeing what we already are,

The great Ocean is that same substance as your own water, it is all from one self and one source. But for those elements that do not feel the attraction of

familiarity, this failure does not come from the water itself, but from the pollution in that water. (Arberry, 2000, p. 62)

In this verse Rumi is saying that the self is the water in the great Ocean, in other words, that the droplet is already part of the Ocean. It is out of ignorance that one feels separate from the Ocean and longs to return to it, when in fact one is already immersed. This is why the 13<sup>th</sup> century Spanish Sufi Ibn 'Arabi, commenting on the verse “flee to God”, says that the flight is not from absence to presence, because God is already ever-present, but it is a flight from ignorance of His presence to knowledge of it.

This journey takes place through the layers of the self, or from another perspective through the levels of consciousness - from a more limited awareness to a more expansive one. In the final unveiling, the Sufi experiences an annihilation of human attributes in order to realize his or her Divine attributes. The final veil of I-ness must fall away in order for Oneness to emerge. In this way, *fana* or annihilation leads to subsistence in and realization of Oneness, or *baqa*. The Sufi concept *baqa* will be discussed in the eighth and final theme of this chapter. Rumi explains the necessity of the annihilation of the individual “I” in the following verse,

With God, two I's cannot find room. You say “I” and He says “I”. Either you die before him, or let Him die before; then duality will not remain. But it is impossible for him to die, either subjectively or objectively, since *He is the Living God, the Undying* (XXV 58). He possesses such Gentleness that were it possible, He would die for you so that duality might vanish. But since it is impossible for Him to die, you die, so that He may manifest Himself to you and duality may vanish. (Chittick, 1983, p. 191)



The ego “I” is illusory, it is a transient and impermanent identification without any lasting substance or beingness.<sup>13</sup> The self is contingent to and dependent on the Absolute. It arises and is supported only temporarily. The Self, on the other hand, is the permanent and everlasting “I” – it is the mark of the Eternal on the temporal and transitory. For the Eternal to appear, the transitory human “I” must pass away, as was prescribed by the Prophet when he urged his disciples to “Die before you die!” (Chittick, 1983, p. 183). When the Prophet spoke these words, he was calling on the aspirant to seek the voluntary spiritual death in order to ascend to the Beloved. Within the Sufi tradition the Prophet is considered the exemplar mystic who lived in this station of *fana* (annihilation). He was a Light bearer and a leader for those who seek to emulate his path towards Self-realization. Rumi states:

When annihilation adorns a man because of his poverty, he becomes shadowless, like Muhammad. Annihilation was the adornment of him who said, ‘Poverty is my pride.’ Like the flame of a candle, he had no shadow... when the candle is wholly annihilated in the fire, you will see no trace of it. (Chittick, 1983, p. 188)

There are three concepts that need to be addressed regarding the quoted verse. They are poverty, annihilation and the symbolism of burning in the flames of Divine Love. Firstly on poverty, when the prophet exclaimed, “my poverty is my pride” he meant the poverty of selfhood. The state of poverty (*faqr*) is required for nearness to God. It is through this poverty that one is brought closer to Union. Poverty does not refer to an impoverished lifestyle in a worldly sense, rather to be a *fakir* is to be in a state of spiritual poverty,

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<sup>13</sup> Within the Buddhist tradition Beingness is called *svabhava* or own-being. The human ego lacks own-being, which means that its existence is contingent to and dependent on the everlasting and permanent essence of Being.

which requires a shedding of human attributes. Thomas Merton, a 20<sup>th</sup> century writer on Christian mysticism, alludes to the state of spiritual poverty quite beautifully in the following excerpt. He writes,

I am the utter poverty of God. I am his emptiness, littleness, nothingness, lostness. When this is understood, my life in His freedom, the self-emptying God of me, is the fullness of Grace. (p. 281)

Merton indicates a total emptying of selfhood in which human attributes are shed in order to bring the lover and Beloved closer, which is the height of spiritual union. The term 'poverty' is synonymous with 'annihilation' and 'nonexistence' (Chittick, 1983, p. 187). Rumi says, "The *fakir's* spirit circles around annihilation, like iron around a magnet. For in his view annihilation is existence: He has washed blindness and error from his eyes." (Chittick, 1983, p. 188). To be fully annihilated, in the most literal sense is to become nonexistent, which is to lack the sense of a separate self and the existence of "I".

In Sufi literature annihilation is sometimes symbolized as spiritual decapitation. This calls to mind the necessary spiritual warfare on the path, known as *jihad*. *Jihad*, which translates as struggle, refers to the spiritual struggle with the *nafs* over its lower levels. This *jihad* is described as 'naughting the self' (Chittick, 1983, p. 173). Rumi says, "Behead your selfhood, oh warrior! Become selfless and annihilated, like a dervish!" (Chittick, 1983, p. 188). The process of annihilation requires great struggle as the ego desperately clings to its existence. The aspirant may also encounter terror as they confront non-being. Once the ego is defeated the individual becomes 'shadowless.' All of the shadow aspects of the self, split off aspects, are now healed, and nothing remains hidden or suppressed. In the Sufi tradition, negative energy is characterized as devilish or

demonic. These devilish or demonic energies are understood to be manifestations of the base fears and the destructive tendencies of the ego. Rumi exclaims, “Kill your vile ego, for it is your own devil. Once you have killed your vile ego, then for certain you can place your foot upon the roof of the seventh heaven (Chittick, 1983, p. 89).

The final aspect of this theme, burning in the flames of Divine Love (*ishq*), refers to burning away the remnants of attachments to selfhood. Attar, the 13th century Sufi saint wrote, “The first step is to say, “God,” and nothing else; the second is intimacy; and the third is to burn”(Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 247). The symbolism of *burning in the flames of Divine Love* indicates that all of the ego attachments and perceptions are incinerated.

Waliye explains that this Love, *ishq*, is not romantic or passionate love, but it is the purest and most exalted form of Love possible. He explains,

Love itself has no hurt encompassed in it, it has no feeling of ill will, no feeling of emptiness... its not nearness or distance that determines your love or your degree of love, it's only your attachment that causes hurt and will put you through agony and grief.

This Love Waliye speaks of is pure undefiled Love that has no attachment. He adds, “Divine love is an acceptance of everything, Divine love is all encompassing all embracing without opinion, without expectation, *it just is.*” In this state of Love all of our anxieties, attachments and fears dissolve in this pure state of Being. The great Sufi of the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Jami wrote,

Be the captive of Love in order that you may be truly free - free from coldness and the worship of self... Although you may attempt to do a hundred things in

this world, only Love will give you release from the bondage of yourself.

(Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 115)

Furthering this point is the Sufi psychologist and teacher, Kabir Helminski who writes, “Only Love can tame the ego and bring it into the service of Love...you might say it is Unity expressing itself. The lover, the beloved, and love itself are all one in reality” (Helminski, 1999, p. 49). In other words, the ego is annihilated in Love and brought to Oneness through Love.

Janan characterizes her experience of *fana* as both letting go and surrender. She explains that “letting go of our attachments, our needs, our desires our longing to hold onto those certain things - whatever they are and they’re not necessarily pleasure points - that bind us to our self.” Janan highlights an interesting point, which is that our attachments may not always be to things that give us pleasure. Rather, they might be familiar concepts to us that, because of their familiarity, offer a false sense of security. Ultimately, any kind of attachment that perpetuates separation will cause suffering. In our conversation, Janan spoke about the difficulty that Westerners may have with the concept of surrender. She says that “to a Muslim born in an Islamic country the concept of surrender and letting go is second nature, and ah, this understanding may be difficult for most Westerners.” The term surrender could be misinterpreted in the West as having to give up one’s rights, freedom, or sense of autonomy, which is against the cultural norms of our society. For the Sufi, submission is one of the central tenets adopted on the path, and comes from the word *islam*. Islam means to submit and also takes as one of its meanings, peace. Therefore, in surrendering one’s ego to a Higher Self the feeling of peace is a natural outcome.

Finally, Janan recalls both the terror at the “loss of a self” and the immense sense of peace and healing once she moved beyond the fear. She felt strongly that it was Grace, which descended upon her and allowed her, in the depth of fear, to embrace the transformation. She says, “at this level it is something you don’t even know how to ask for, it is all by the workings of Grace.” To surrender, Janan feels, is to be perfectly aligned with God’s will, to place one’s fate in “God’s hands.” It is to go beyond personal will and to be certain that “whatever will be, will be.”

At the beginning of Rashid’s journey he experienced a temporary state of annihilation, or non-being, while on LSD. This experience was frightening and confusing for him but gave him a vision of what was to come in his journey. Also, because of his earlier experience Rashid felt he was much more “prepared and equipped” to enter into the mysterious terrain of *fana*. He has also felt his journey to be “building up to something great” something that would be sustaining and lasting.

Rashid was unable to speak extensively about his experience of *fana*, but chose instead to share a prose poem he wrote about his experience. He writes,

So there is something in us that is Higher than us, say “*la ilaha illallah*” and you cease to worship yourself. Allah is in us - but if we have not spoken the truth we have not seen that the Heart in which the soul resides is more powerful than our selfish minds can conceive of. Worship without the affirmation that God is One is but worship of yourself - it is in vain. Say Muhammad *an rasulu'llah* and you recognize that you are human, but there has been another human who has been an Ocean of Knowledge to which your own is merely a drop. Recite *surah al-ikhlas*

and you perceive all this - the Oneness of all. And your soul will soar but you will remain humble.

Rashid describes, *fana* as complete surrender, which gives rise to a great state of humility. This humility is the realization of one's nothingness in the face of Truth. Rashid mentions *surah al-ikhlas*, in his prose, which is the most recited chapter of the Qur'an. The affirmation of Oneness is clearly expressed in the five stanzas of *surah al-ikhlas*. The opening line in this *surah* reads, *Qul hu Allah hu Ahad*, which translates as "Say: God is One." It contains the essence of the Qur'an in that its message is Oneness. The title of this *surah*, *Ikhlas* is Arabic for sincerity and refers to approaching something with an honest intention, without deception. In other words, by approaching the journey to Oneness with authenticity and sincerity one might return to the primordial state of unity or *tawhid*. Rashid's prose writing is a reflection of his own awakening to Oneness in which, "fragmentation, false appearances, and separations are all dissolved in the light of [this] certainty" (Barks & Green, 2000, p. 138).

For Fouad, his approach towards *fana* was met with resistance and difficulty. In our discussion he echoed the same sentiment as Janan, which is that for Westerners it is almost counterintuitive to consider the annihilation of the ego. He explains,

Fana is both attractive and frightening at the same time, for people who come from the West, where the ego is the center of one's existence and measures our experiences of happiness, and defines for us the meaning of our life, and our place in the world, you know. To deny it is kind of perverse, you know (laughs)...

Fouad's introduction to *fana* came to him conceptually through reading Sufi philosophy. He had read and understood it translated as extinction and thought "extinction of what?"

Extinction of the self... than what?" Fouad was troubled yet intrigued by this idea of ego-annihilation, and approached the Sheikh for clarification. The Sheikh informed Fouad that *fana* is fundamentally about being with God. He emphasized that it is a gain and not a loss. Many years later Fouad surrendered to this wondrous transformative state, he reflects on it in the following passage,

It is like you are going into the Divine, and then realizing that you were within it the whole time, but you have only suddenly become conscious of it in that state. The last veil finally parts as you emerge in this, it is not you attaining in any sense, it is more like you die to yourself in the ultimate sense and are reborn in everything.

Fouad explains *fana* as 'being-with-God' without implying that there is a duality. Since all of one's personal attachments fall away in the state of *fana* there is no one there to "be with God" in this sense. Abu Hasan al- Nuri, a 9<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint writes, "The Sufi is he to whom nothing is attached, and who does not become attached to anything" (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 246).

Fouad continues to reflect on his experience by adding that *fana* transforms how one sees the world. Once the ego is purified it remains as a tool to relate to the world and no longer rules over the human being. The ego is in complete service and direction of the Higher self.

Nuriyana describes her experience of *fana* as "a complete emptying." She refers to the state of *fana* as being completely detached. For Nuriyana it was through her invocation that she was brought to the station of *fana*. She recalls,

*Fana* is when you begin to see things in their illusions, in their transitory states, and that the deepest things, the most traumatizing things, you just move through them, um, gracefully and it's as if you place the world in its proper context, that it arose in a form of profundity, so you look through it, you're able to look through it detached.

Similar to Fouad's experience, Nuriyana explains that a purified ego remains after *fana* in order to function and relate to the world. Nuriyana feels that the ego has been pacified but remains, because "we need it as we're still in the world even though we are no longer of it."

To 'die before you die' is the seventh stage in the Sufi journey. It is a voluntary spiritual death that constitutes the complete annihilation of the ego. In *fana* the final veil of separation passes away, and the self is transformed in its realization of Selfhood. When the false selves fall away what emerges is the latent essence of what has *always* been. Through this process the self is purified and cleansed of all of its attachments. The aspirant is liberated and therefore is able to perceive the world with a sense of clarity, love, but also detachment. Many of the co-researchers were unable to describe their experience of *fana* because of its transcendent and ineffable nature. It is experienced beyond the realm of language and description. The co-researchers felt that any attempt to describe the experience would reduce and limit it to a conceptual understanding. One of the co-researchers offered a poem to approximate the experience.

The co-researchers experienced complete surrender as a necessary condition for *fana*. They noted an intense degree of fear or terror at the fulcrum point of this surrender. To 'die before you die' meant losing the comfort and familiarity of the self. It was the



death of the self as it was once known and experienced. In the moment of surrender it required letting go of the boundaries and limitations of the self in order to move into the Absolute field of consciousness. Many co-researchers described an element of Grace, which they felt carried them through this experience into this state of Divine love. In Sufism the attraction towards the Divine is often characterized as a moth to a flame, in the words of Rumi “When the flaming candle sends its invitation, the moth’s spirit does not hold back from being consumed!” (Chittick, 1983, p. 223). In this theme Divine Love, or *ishq*, burns away all of the lower aspects of the self and annihilates ego attachments that cause suffering. In this way the ego is obliterated from what it once was, is purified of its attachments, and has surrendered to the guidance of the Higher self.

### **Subsistence in Oneness: Emergence of the Essential Self**

When you have become living through Him, you are indeed He.  
That is utter Oneness...

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, The Sufi Path of Love

The Sufi journey is a process of uncovering one’s essential nature. It is a return to the original state of Being, which is undifferentiated from the great ocean of Divine consciousness. The principle of Divine Unity is called *tawhid*, and the realization of this Unity is experienced as *baqa*. *Baqa* denotes subsistence in Oneness, in the Divine reality. It marks the height of development, which is the nondual realization of Ultimate Selfhood. In Islamic cosmology it is understood that we are born into the world as fallen beings from a ‘paradisiacal state’ of pure Spirit, to an earthly state of flesh. In this way, the human being is formed of clay and Spirit. The ego is a product of the mixing of these two dimensions and is understood to mediate between these realities. If one remains

identified with the flesh alone, it becomes difficult for the Spirit to make its Return until physical death.

The Sufi path offers tools and guidance to facilitate this realization of Divine Unity. Hayward Fox, a transpersonal psychologist, describes the effects of the fall from a psychological perspective, when he states that, “The separate self is established and set apart from the Oneness as the human being identifies with smaller and smaller aspects of the Whole. Each constriction leaves the human being more fragmented, disconnected, and dissatisfied” (1985, p. 91). From a Sufi perspective this constriction can be understood as identifying with lower aspects of the *nafs*, which represent lesser degrees of consciousness.

The Sufi is one who longs to return to her original state of wholeness, and hopes to make the ‘ascent’ during her lifetime. Once the Spirit is freed from the prison of the ego It reintegrates into the non-aggregated Unity known as *tawhid*. Rumi asks, “When will the bird of my Spirit fly from the cage toward the garden?” (Chittick, 1983, p 33). In the state of *baqa* the human self is purified of its earthly attachments as it realizes its true essence in Spirit. The voluntary death of the Sufi in *dying before death*, is both an emptying out, of all lesser degrees of consciousness, and also a filling up, as one subsists in Divine Oneness. To finally enter into this nondual state of union with the Beloved is to realize the nonexistence of the finite self. The realization of non-existence is followed by an ontological rebirth, Rumi explains,

I died and came alive through Thee: Then I saw the world for the second time.

What place is this for “me”? I have died under the foot of His Love. No, I said it wrong: He who is alive through Him can never die. (Chittick, 1983, p.185)

The death of the self marks the death of a limited consciousness, and a rebirth into Divine consciousness. This annihilation leads to subsistence in and sustenance through God. Wilber explains that this final stage of realization includes the *suchness* of all levels. He writes, “the ultimate is not one level among others, but the reality, condition, or suchness of all levels” (Wilber, 1986, p. 74). In other words, the nondual station of *baqa* is a summation of all previous levels of awareness that converge at one point. The 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Bayzaid Bistami characterizes the abandonment of the self as a snake that has shed its skin. He writes “I came out of Bayazid-ness as a snake from its skin. Then I looked, I saw that lover, Beloved, and love are one because in that state of unification all can be one” (Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 250). The unitive consciousness that is held and supported by Love is comparable to Sankara’s view of *Nirvikapla Samadhi*, wherein the transcendental experience is constituted by the Divine bearing witness to Itself. This means that from the outset there is no real subject-object dualism. The self is illusory and the Divine has always been a latent potential awaiting realization.

Complete subsistence in God, as Rumi notes, is ‘the limit of the travelers’ (Chittick, 1983, p. 247). It is the height of the spiritual path. The great 9<sup>th</sup> century Sufi saint Mansur Al-Hallaj articulated this station in his statement “I am Truth.” He experienced the direct perception of Truth, or God. Rumi offers an analysis of Hallaj’s statement when he writes,

When Hallaj’s love for God reached its utmost limit.... He said, “I am God,” that is, “I have been annihilated; God remains, nothing else.” This is extreme humility and the utmost limit of servanthood. It means, “He alone is.” To make a false claim and to be proud is to say, “Thou are God and I am the servant.” For in this

way you are affirming your own existence, and duality is the necessary result. If you say, 'He is god' that too is duality for there cannot be a 'He' without an 'I'. Hence God said, 'I am God.' Other than He, nothing else existed. Hallaj had been annihilated, so those were the words of God. (Chittick, 1983, p. 191-192)

Hallaj was persecuted for exclaiming, "I am Truth." The clerics of the time were unable to understand the mystical significance of this claim. Contrary to their accusations Hallaj's statement was far from narcissistic or self-aggrandizing. In fact his statement represented extreme humility. Hallaj had completely emptied himself of all of his attachments to selfhood and realized the permanent nature of his being in Truth. Like a fish, that does not know it is submerged in the water, we may not recognize that we subsist in the Divine reality, as it may appear we are separated from our primordial state. The strain, anxiety and malaise of the soul when it feels separate from its source is just as a fish that tosses on the dry land. Rumi writes,

For a long time the fish struggles upon the hot earth and burning sand... separation from the ocean allows him no taste of life's sweetness – after all, that is separation from the Ocean of Life. How should someone who has seen that Ocean find joy in this life?" (Chittick, 1983, p. 71)

The fish do not know the water sustains them until they are separated from it. Only after experiencing the state of separation do they long to return to the Ocean.

This final state of nondual Self-realization was very difficult for the co-researchers to articulate. Many referred to this state as living presence, being fully in the moment, complete acceptance, effortlessness, wholeness, a total healing from within and throughout, and being completely absorbed within one's Center. The term *tawhid* came

through in everyone's interview. Fouad described his experience of *baqa* by speaking about *tawhid* in the following passage,

It is *tawhid*, the unity of God, which we affirm with *la ilaha illallah*. There is nothing but God, and there is no being besides God, um, that everything that exists, I feel like I'm putting words in front of the experience, but it's the only way to describe it, um, everything that exists is contingent on God, only God really exists, there is no real being and no sense of independence. I experienced myself being connected to the Divine in an eternal and everlasting way, and when the material part of me dies, I know the Spirit will continue.

Fouad describes his experience of Oneness as his connection to Spirit, in which he discovers this indestructible reality of himself, one that is 'eternal and everlasting.' Fouad recalls that he had been given instruction on the nature of his spirit, yet was not convinced of its reality until he came to know it *experientially*. In his vignette he notes that to describe his experience of *baqa* is to "put words in front of the experience" indicating that this experience is beyond the realm of language, the mental eye, and belongs to the realm of *transcendilia*. In our conversation Fouad referred to Hallaj's famous statement, "I am Truth", and recalled the Sheikh's comments of this statement. He recalls, "The Sheikh said that if he were asked to refute it he would have said, tell the One who said that to say it through my tongue and claim it falsehood, if It would be." In other words, if Hallaj were to deny or refute this statement again, it would not be him denying it, but it would be God denying Its own existence.

In this next passage Fouad continues to try and articulate his experience. He speaks about this sense of being aware that Fouad “is the microcosm in the macrocosm” and recounts that it is like feeling submerged. He reflects,

It is like when Yunus Emre<sup>14</sup> says, um, in referring to God. “I am like the honeycomb immersed in the honey. Don’t tear the honeycomb away from the honey” You know um, the more general experience that you have is not that you are going into the Divine experience but that you were within that the whole time and that you were never generally conscious of it. It particularly doesn’t feel like you are penetrating or going deep into something, it’s just all of a sudden like, there is no act that you’re doing, it ‘s just like, the Christian word is grace.

Something that occurs without effort it’s a gift; it’s the gift of grace...

Fouad speaks about the impact of grace as allowing him to become conscious of his true nature. He says that the realization of *baqa* “doesn’t have much relationship with what you’re doing.” He admits that keeping up the meditation practices, the *dhikr* and prayer, helps to facilitate the quieting of the mind and the opening of the intuitive center, however, it cannot ensure the arrival of *baqa*. He explains,

This isn’t a result of any measure of my efforts, there’s nothing I’m doing so then why am I having this opening, and this awareness? Then you’re like, it doesn’t have to do with me, the only thing is you turn back to what the Christian mystics would say that Grace is a gift and it comes through Mercy and Love, and it is not deserved nor does it have any relationship with what you’re doing. You’re not

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<sup>14</sup> Yunus Emre is a popular Turkish poet.

receiving what you're giving, it comes to you without you deserving it, you didn't earn this, you know...

According to Fouad it was Grace that allowed him to move into Oneness with a disproportionate degree of effort or 'doing'.

All of the co-researchers note the healing effects at this station. Fouad experiences "great joy" and "bliss", which he finds tremendously healing. Fouad admits that nondual Being is very difficult to sustain. He explains that consciousness is fluid and fluctuates to degrees of awareness. This humility and caution in approaching the state of *baqa* is, according to Ken Wilber, a healthy attitude. In his "spectrum of development" Wilber notes that one of the pathologies of the nondual level is the assumption that it is a perfect and permanent state (2000). Although Fouad was aware of the fragility of *baqa* he noted that it had created lasting shifts in him that would make it difficult to return to his old self-concepts.

Rashid also notes the lasting transformative effect of his journey. He relays that it has given him a new degree of happiness. He recalls being very cynical and frustrated for many years prior to his entry into Sufism. Rashid's own description of *baqa* is similar to Fouad in that he recalls "Grace" and "Mercy" bringing him into the presence of the Divine. Rashid believes that Self-realization is made possible because it is part of our "Divine destiny." He says, "it's the heavens that draws out your density, it's not your actions per se." There is no amount of action that can make this reality known, only in surrender does something open up that is greater than yourself. Rashid describes *baqa* further by saying "what I experienced was a kind of Oneness of being and that everything

that I saw, every person that I came across, every leaf, every grain of sand had something to say and was part of this Oneness.” He continues,

I can't even describe it, it is like how I understand things, that I'm not separate from you or God or nature, you know, these nondual experiences are so profound yet so subtle that it's not like I can perceive them, you know, like dissolving into Oneness and being absorbed in a reality that is not separate from my environment is not something I can think about it's just always there. Maybe long ago I could distinguish between states, but I can't say that I have awareness of ah, of moving from one state to another.

The transpersonal states Rashid moves in and out of are so subtle in their degrees that he finds it difficult to differentiate between them. Rashid comments that the gradual feeling of dissolving into Oneness is not such a radical shift, as it is moving into who and what we *already* are. It is in this state that one feels the most complete, at ease and whole. Finally Rashid explains feeling limited in his ability to convey his experience through language. He says, “How do you articulate something that is beyond our mental grasp? You know, you can point to it through talking about some of these experiences, but the only way to really convey it is if you send the person on their own personal journey.”

Nuriyana feels that in her own journey the *dhikr* was instrumental in emptying out all of the veils that separated her from Oneness. She notes that when human attributes are emptied out, the entirety of the Divine Name is held in that space. Rumi speaks about the empty chalice, which is filled with the wine of intoxication from union with the Divine. When the human heart becomes empty of selfhood only then can it hold the Supreme Name. As Rumi says, “Someone with a clear and empty heart mirrors images of



the Invisible” (Helminski, 1999, p. 86). Nuriyana explains that her consciousness was transformed into Divine consciousness through the Name. This state of Oneness became the lens through which she perceived the world. She explains,

I believe that in the invocation we empty everything out to literally hold the Name, the Divine Name, and that Divine Name becomes the lens with which you see the world, it becomes the sensation of what you touch, how you see people, how you see the natural world, how you interpret the experiences that come to you, you literally inscribe the Divine within so that it completely shifts the way we are in the world, and it starts with those very lucid moments after *dhikr* where I’m invoking and it’s as if I see through God’s eyes right, its even a visual change, like you’ve put on some new shades, when we hold the Divine Name and are infused with these Divine attributes it changes your interactions with the world.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century Sufi Sheikh and master of the Jerrahi order Muzaffer Effendi notes, “The eyes of the dervish who is a true lover sees nothing but God; his heart knows nothing but God. God is the eye by which he sees, the hand with which he holds, and the tongue with which he speaks”(Faidman & Frager, 1997, p. 115). Once the human being has rid herself of all human attributes the Divine attributes manifest through her every action. Helminski writes, “the complete or perfected self... has attained the full palette of attributes and completed the return to the state of exceptional ordinariness” (1999, p. 113). Furthermore, he adds “all qualities and actions belong solely to the Transpersonal Reality” (p.113), which is to say that at this nondual station there is nothing that emanates through the human being that is separate from Oneness.

In this next passage Nuriyana describes the shifts that have accompanied this state of *baqa*. She says,

The sense of wholeness, the ability to see the Real in everything, the ability to, at least momentarily be surrendered into the interconnection of everything belonging to the Divine, being able to see things as they are, clearer and clearer...

Nuriyana mentions experiencing the state of *baqa* “at least momentarily”, which suggests a tendency of falling out of this state. This echoes Fouad’s experience, which is that one is prone to shift in their degree of awareness. All of the co-researchers were reluctant of claiming to abide permanently in this state. They all approached speaking about *baqa* with tremendous humility and highlighted the fragile nature of human psychology. In other words, as long as one remains in the world, one is susceptible of returning to a slave of the ego.

In the next passage Nuriyana describes *baqa* as an experience in which everything in her life becomes integrated and experienced through her heart-center. She is able to perceive the “unity in the multiplicity.” She explains that *Baqa* is the pinnacle and culmination of her “journey inside” where everything is realized through Oneness,

You stand in that Center and you relate your world from that Center. You don’t move, your professional world, your personal world, your mundane world, right, you know, cleaning your house, getting through your relationships, getting through your intellectual work, getting through like rush hour. There is nothing that can disconnect you from that Center, and in that Center where you stand and you’re held, submerged within God because He says He doesn’t meet you

anywhere outside of it. It's that beautiful *hadith*<sup>15</sup> where he says the cosmos doesn't contain me, the sky doesn't, the earth doesn't, only in the hearts of my believers, I'm there, I'm contained in that heart, and that center is where it is, and you can stand literally solid through a blizzard. It remains your amour and you stand and it can be in the middle of a tornado and you won't move. The Center is the present, it's the past, and it's the future, it's the everlasting and it's exactly what will not die and it will not transform or be corrupted in the world.

Nuriyana's experience of *baqa* is one that allows her to effortlessly move through her day with a sense of ease and an undisturbed presence. She recalls a prophetic saying, which locates the Divine reality in the spiritual heart of the believer. She calls her essential self her Center, which is her locus of perception. She believes it to be a permanent and incorruptible reality. As Rumi writes, "Everyone is so afraid of death, but the real Sufis just laugh: nothing tyrannizes their hearts. What strikes the oyster shell doesn't damage the pearl" (Helminski, 1999, p. 86). For Nuriyana her essential Self, which she calls her Center, is indestructible. It does not waver or become worn down when it encounters the most difficult or turbulent aspects of life in the world. Rumi speaks about the oyster shell, as a metaphor for the material aspects of the human being, which can be worn down or damaged; yet, the innermost essence of the pearl is incorruptible.

In the following passage Nuriyana speaks to the profundity of the realized state of *Baqa*, and the complete and total absorption into Oneness that dissolves all sense of dualism and distinction,

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<sup>15</sup> A *hadith* is a prophetic saying ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad.

As everything becomes aligned, all the distinctions vanish. When everything perishes it is just the face of God, it is *just la ilaha illallah*, it is just that and that's where the dualisms, the esoteric and exoteric, the good and the bad, all of that just fall away. This is when you ultimately get a sense of what *tawhid* is, and the difference between Sufism and Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, dissipates and then it's just God and so what even seems contradictory, all of the distinctions get consumed in the totality of that Unity.

Although the *dhikr* was, for Nuriyana, a catalyst that brought her close to the seat of Oneness, she mentions the necessity of Grace along her journey. She adds,

it doesn't happen automatically, it comes through God's grace, but it's almost as if you are literally churning yourself in the process; until you reach the epoch of *la illa ha illallah* truly, you know, in that space where you just see the world as One as just the face of God I think that is truly what is death, spiritual death, that's the outcome of die before you die, that is when the mountain disappears...

Nuriyana has articulated the element of Grace in her realization, and also the act of churning oneself, or actively focusing and engaging in spiritual practices. The Sufis metaphorically talk about the two wings that allow the bird to soar towards Self-realization. One wing represents rigorous spiritual practices and the other represents God's Grace. This combination, which Nuriyana speaks of, is necessary to bring the aspirant to the greatest heights of Consciousness.

Another interesting point for Nuriyana was her use of symbolism when she remarked "spiritual death, that's the outcome of die before you die, that is when the *mountain disappears*." Nuriyana continues to talk about the analogy of the *disappearing*

mountain by explaining that the spiritual journey is symbolic of a mountain path we climb, which takes us to summit of Self-realization. However she highlights the great paradox inherent in the nondual journey, which is that the mountain appears so real, yet is ultimately an illusion. She remarks,

Our entire line of this conversation has been about the mountain that isn't there (laughs). Ultimately we know its not there but we can spend hours talking about it. It's just that, it's the *unfolding mystery*, ultimately *tawhid* is that there is not a mountain to climb to get to God. And upon this realization it just vanishes...

From an Absolute perspective there is no need to climb the mountain path because there is nothing that stands in the way of our Self-realization, there is no mountain. What do get in our way though, are the attachments to selfhood, which are ultimately illusory. In other words, the journey is *journeyless*; the essence of who we are, in Spirit, is already latent within us. There is *nowhere* to go. Nuriyana was humored by the paradox of the mountain. She remarks that the entire "line of our conversation" about her lived experience on the Sufi path was about an illusory journey, and yet, we still needed to talk about it, which is precisely why it is a paradox and what makes it an *unfolding mystery*.

For Janan, it was the death of her father that brought her to the nondual state of *baqa*. It was a similar painful opening that initially awakened the eye of her heart, which was the catalyst for her entry into Oneness. Janan recalls feeling at the fulcrum or tipping point of entering this state when the events surrounding her father's passing occurred. She recounts having had a very difficult history with her father, and although the relationship was strained she went to be with him on his deathbed. She reflects,

I couldn't look at my father, he had such terror in his eyes, it was unbearable, so I began to look away... then some great miraculous gift shuddered itself down through the top of my head and out through my heart, it absolutely was Divine and it physically altered me. I mean it came in physically and it, it, I felt honestly like a chicken breast opening with all that gelatinous, you know, just absolutely opening. The power of what came out of my chest that force of light and energy was extraordinary it had come in through the top of my head and it went straight out to my father, and I said to him on the waves of that "I love you and I forgive you." And then three breaths after that he died and I was left with this gapping wide-open heart, I mean it was just enormous and with total knowledge at that point, which has never left me...

This moment was a complete awakening for Janan. She remarks moving beyond the limitations of herself, at a moment of her "greatest weakness" and her "greatest sense of denial" at the sight of her father dying. Her father's death was the impetus for her realization, as she was quickly moved into the state of Oneness. She characterized the incredible force that descended upon that day as "pure Divine Love." She claims it was a gift that was completely unasked for, and was something she could have never anticipated. Janan mentions that this full awakening in *baqa* gave her "total knowledge." Helminski writes that in Oneness "there is nothing that cannot be known", that it is a state of omniscience in which "one can access any knowledge because one is unified with the Whole" (1999, p. 71).

For Janan the breath is the very link to Oneness. In the *dhikr* the repetition of the sacred sound *Hu*<sup>16</sup> represents the essence of Spirit and the Divine breath. Helminski writes, “The indwelling presence of God is signified by the word, *Hu*, the pronoun of Divine Presence” (1999, p.234). Janan feels sustained in her connection with the Divine breath. In her own realization she speaks about becoming an empty vessel, which can completely hold and sustain the Divine Breath. Janan reflects,

The *Hu* that is the breath of God that when he blows it through you, it sounds you, if you can be of the vessel... and here comes in the wonderful symbolism of the *ney*, of course that is the empty reed, that can be blown, that can be vibrated if it’s poised enough to receive this Divine breath...and that’s the instrument we can always go back to in order to contemplate truth and center ourselves. All that chanting the chanting of *Om*, the chant of *Hu*, I mean it’s the sound it’s the still small sound you can hear in the crickets sounding and the fan humming.

For Janan, music and breath sustains her link to Oneness. She adds, “music is heart beat it’s the breath, it’s vibration, it is a sacred language, your in the *living Presence*.” Music has the power to communicate without the personal interpretation of words, and is totally freed from language and the “mental eye.” Music has the power to unite people despite perceived differences, and take them to that inextricably mysterious non-verbal place.

Through music one can completely go to the essentials, as it is a Universal language.

Music also has the capacity to transcend culture, gender and age barriers. Janan remarks,

You speak not the same language whatsoever do you have one word or one cultural experience in common but you can come together over that piece of

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<sup>16</sup> The article *Hu* is similar to *Om* in Hinduism and *Aum* in Tibetan Buddhism.

music and the worlds will open, so it has the power to go to this nondual place and to transcend the ordinary. It has this universality of culture and language and gender and so for us as musicians, having started with this orientation at such a young age, it seems absurd to get caught up in these ah, divisive places because we've never lived anything that proved that that was valid territory.

Janan feels that her life in music has created an opening for nondual Being. She feels that her training in music has given her insight into transcendent states of consciousness as it connects to a Universal language. Janan characterizes her life in music as a life of spiritual discipline in which she describes her focus and dedication to her practice. She speaks of the intense training that had a “ritual and almost a prayer aspect” to it. This includes trusting her teacher and requires the humility of knowing that one is following a great line of masters. All of these aspects relate to aspects of the spiritual path. Janan defers to the writings of Inayat Khan and asks to read a passage from one of his books. She recites the following verse,

I played the *vina*<sup>17</sup> until my heart turned into the same instrument. Then I offered this instrument to the Divine Musician, the only Musician existing. Since then I have become His flute, and when He chooses He plays His music. The people give me credit for this music, which in reality is not due to me, but to the Musician who plays on His own instrument.

Janan characterizes the state of Oneness as allowing the Divine Musician to sound His human instrument. As one is sounded their actions are completely directed by the perfection of the Divine hand. Janan explains that in order to achieve the perfect tuning of

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<sup>17</sup> The *vina* is an Indian stringed instrument similar to the lute.



the spiritual heart in which we can “encode the metaphorical language of existence” it requires much discipline, she reflects,

The heart is the instrument that we all get to master because it’s our guide and our expresser, and our receptacle of knowledge and of truth, and it is the only place where we really can encode the metaphorical language of existence, only in there do the answers lie, um, in what we live and encounter in the symbolism of a dream. The truth of all these things exists within our hearts, hearing that still small voice within is a point of quieting down, so that we can hear the heart and to be open to the majesty of what can be transmitted through it, all of the rest of everything else are peripheral and distracting arguments, meaning why am I fighting with you, whose right and whose wrong, you shouldn’t be doing this and that and the whole complete mess of what goes on all the time is ah, a distraction from that one essential place of Truth.

Janan speaks about the centrality of the heart as the location of guidance and Truth. In the next passage she recalls how her battle with cancer brought her to the edge of death. She explains that the liminal stage between life and death gave her tremendous insight into what she calls “the essentials.” In recalling this nondual state she imparts,

I have no barriers, I have moved to the place where there are no barriers. I was so ready to go, I was going to go, and so I know that place and I know that all of these things ah that we put up are so artificial [dogmas and differences that humanity continues to fight over] these are such silly places to get lost in and they’re all phenomenal distractions from the business at hand.

It is clear that for Janan there were particular events in her life that were very influential in moving her into nondual Self-realization. Her encounters with death including her own brush with death and her father's passing, brought her very deep insights into the nature of the Essential self.

At one point in our conversation Janan conveys what it means to be in a state of *baqa*. She shares a moment of deep connectedness with her husband Yusuf, and her cat Feede in which time stopped, and they were suspended in the eternity of the moment,

It was a summer's evening, the crickets were singing, the bullfrogs were singing, the stars were out and I was in the shed with Yusuf and Feede, and Feede was on my lap and Yusuf clicked on Cecilia Bartoli singing this Vivaldi song from the early Aria antique that we all learned as singers expect she sings them as we only could have hoped to sing them... and Feede who was restless and difficult at that moment fell back in a swoon in *fana*, with his eyes like a little ancient Buddha listening to her, and they are achingly gorgeously sung. And there we were in the darkness under the stars with the summer sound outside and I was in a space with two other breathing creatures and this phantom sound, this voice, and we were all suspended in this same place, and I have never in a long time felt so totally, um, transported and sharing in that with two others it was unforgettable... it was so glorious...

Janan remarks that what she loves about this contemporary lifestyle is that our stories of nondual Being are not "the apocryphal ancient stories of mystics or the lives of saints." She adds, "we have these kinds of stories, and we must be very careful when we're being very orthodox that we don't dismiss these as actually being the Grace that we've been

waiting so long to have visit upon us.” For Janan the nondual experience she has articulated is just as sacred as any other that may be considered more “orthodox” from a religious perspective. Janan claims that these experiences of Oneness “are so healing” and are so “inexplicably mysterious.” It is mostly impossible to prepare for the moment when this Grace descends. She reflects, “when you least expect it and in ways that are so powerful” she continues, “you would have to be a total skeptic to deny Its existence.”

Finally, Janan notes the fragility of sustaining the state of *baqa*, that although this height of Realization requires a profound breakthrough in which one might be suspended in that for some time, it is much easier to fall back into the subtle degrees of separate self existence. The intruding sense of “I” and “me” might easily return,

It’s terribly hard to sustain this, I feel that very few beings have had that sustaining power and can come from that place in a consistent way, um, or, or they can come from that place fairly consistently in a certain defined situation or repertoire, but um, as the phrase puts it when the buttons get pushed, are completely unable...

Waliye describes *baqa* as “to be in all God’s perfection without the intermingling or the intercession of I, me.” In this state the final veil that separates the self from the Self dissolves. In order for Oneness to emerge the self must die. One loses everything in *fana*, only to gain everything in *baqa*. In the following excerpt Waliye describes what it is like to subsist in Oneness. He reflects,

The I need, I have, I see, I smell... all that stops, you’re just part of the whole thing, which is what we have always been anyway. The thing that stops us from being what we really are is the idea of self and the consistent intervention of I and

the need to do, the need to see, the need to feel and even the need to get to Self-realization...

Waliye highlights that *baqa* is the letting go of the idea of yourself, the “I.” Waliye has also described how in this state the human being realizes what has always been present. In this sense the human being does not develop into anything other than Itself. The fundamental unity and Oneness that is already the essence of its being.

The ultimate end of being on this earth, the ultimate realization is that everything is one, then there is no recognizing you, because you recognize everyone – period. It’s being absorbed into the unity of Truth, and the truth is that we’re all one and all interconnected, indivisible, inseparable forever, always have been and always will be.

For Waliye *baqa* is the integration of the self into its larger more inclusive Whole. At this final level of “ultimate realization” the self is experienced as completely interdependent and embedded in the totality of existence. Waliye felt unable to convey the nature of *baqa* in its essence. He felt that his explanations of *baqa* were insufficient in their ability to capture the reality of this ultimate state. He remarks, *It is* “beyond words”, and can only be approximated through language. In other words, one must experience it directly.

After sitting silently together for a few minutes Waliye began to open up about an experience of *baqa*, and was able to articulate his experience in a fairly simple and accessible manner. He characterizes the experience of *baqa* as melting into the totality of the moment. He reflects,

I think all of us have experienced this a few times, at least once, where you’re lying in a field and everything is just so, just the way it’s supposed to be, and you

kind of melt into that, and you no longer exist, you're part of the sounds, the smells, the colors and everything is so bright and everything is exactly as it should be, and everything is in its place and everything belongs there and nothing has ever been out of place and it has always been, and it always will be even though the next moment is going to change.

Waliye describes residing in both the Oneness and the multiplicity at the same time, which is the paradox of nondual Being. In other words, one can experience the shifts and changes of the temporal world while internally remaining connected to and absorbed in Oneness. In *baqa* nothing exists outside of the Divine reality, as one is anchored in that Eternal Presence. Everything is united at that one point and subsists therein. Thus, the journey is one that leads to the realization of one's true nature in which "all appearance expresses directly the wonderment of Being" (Fox, 1985, p. 97).

In this final stage of the Sufi journey, the co-researchers have arrived at nondual Self-realization as articulated by Waliye. At his stage the *nafs* are purified of all the constructed identities that cause it to be divided against itself, alienated from the rest of humanity, and God. The transpersonal psychologist Hayward Fox writes about this as follows,

Different therapies and religious practices address themselves to healing the splits that occur at various developmental stages, and they integrate these splits into larger wholes: persona and shadow form integrated ego; mind and body form organism; separate organism identified with humanity; humanity recognizes its inseparability with the Absolute – God. (1985, p. 97)

The healing potential of religious practice, as outlined by Fox, is documented within transpersonal psychology. Sufism offers the human being tools that facilitate the realization of this absolute state of Oneness. In this study, the co-researchers have realized their Ultimate Selfhood as Spirit. Wilber describes this Realization as the “eternal abode as absolute Spirit, radiant and all-pervading, one and many, only and all – the complete integration and identity of manifest Form with the unmanifest Formless” (Wilber, 1986, p. 74). The “eternal abode of absolute Spirit” characterizes the Essential Self, which marks the eighth and final stage of the Sufi journey. The Essential Self has always been available as a latent potential. Nothing was “attained” or acquired in this sense. At this stage there is a collapse of all dualities, the inner and outer world become one. In the Gospel of Thomas, Christ articulates a state of Being that can be likened to the description of *baqa*:

They Said to Him, “Shall we then, being children, enter the Kingdom?” Jesus said to them, “When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer, and the outer as the inner, and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female into a single one.... Then shall you enter [the Kingdom].” (Guillaumont & Quispel, 1959)

This station of nondual Being marks the culmination of the spiritual *unfolding* experienced in the Sufi journey. It was symbolically represented in the analogy of the empty chalice and the reed flute. Once the human being is emptied and purified of the constructs of selfhood, they become the instrument of God - the empty reed that is sounded by the Divine Breath or the empty chalice that exists in the fullness of the Infinite Reality. At this stage the co-researchers have gone *beyond* ego identifications to

discover their transpersonal identity. Carl Jung notes that there is a point in the journey towards Self-realization where the ego turns and bows to the Self, at this stage the ego is in complete submission to the higher Self. The most integrated, whole and healed way of being in the world is articulated by Frances Vaughan (1985) as the transpersonal Self.

She writes,

The transpersonal self characteristically is experienced as wise and compassionate, alert and calm. Perception is clear, accurate, and nonattached. Affect is joyful and loving, and the predominant emotion is gratitude. There is an easy flow of energy, clear visions, easily focused or diffused attention, and a sense of being connected to everyone and everything as an integral part of a larger whole. At the same time, this awareness can be described as being nothing special, or just a quiet letting be.

(Vaughan, 1985, p. 27)

Fouad, Rashid, Nuriyana, Janan and Waliye have all noted the healing experienced at transpersonal levels of consciousness. They report a radical transformation of the self; from a self that was caught in the throes of ego existence, identifying solely with *form*, to a Self that is completely liberated through transpersonal awareness. Adyashanti (2003) writes that this radical transformation constitutes a total “change of occupancy” which indicates that a previous conceptualization of the self has died and a new Self is reborn.

The co-researcher’s journey has awakened life beyond the ego. It has brought them a deep sense of connectedness with all life and freedom from their troubled psyche. The co-researchers report that this Ultimate state of nondual being is one that is perceived in peak moments and temporary states, and is not always sustained.

The very last piece from my interview with Janan was her recitation of a Rumi poem called “Only Breath” where she emphasizes the intimate connection one has to God through the breath. For Janan this poem conveys beautifully the station of *baqa*, which is to effortlessly become *only* the Divine Breath.

Only Breath

Not Christian, or Jew or Muslim, not Hindu

Buddhist, Sufi or Zen.

Not any religion or cultural system.

I am not from the East or the West,  
not out of the ocean or up from the ground,

not natural or ethereal,

not composed of elements at all.

I do not exist,

am not an entity in this world or the next,  
did not descend from Adam and Eve or any origin story.

My place is placeless, a trace of the traceless.

Neither body or soul.

I belong to the beloved,  
have seen the two worlds as one

and that one call to and know,

first, last, outer, inner,

only that breath,

breathing human being.



## **Chapter V - Discussion of the Research Findings**

### **Introduction**

In the closing chapter of this thesis a summary of the eight themes in the Sufi journey are reviewed. A look at the research strengths and limitations of this study, as well as possible ideas for future research, are examined. Implications for the health field, the environmental crisis and for counseling are discussed. Finally, I will reflect on my own personal journey through this study as an implicated researcher.

### **A Review of the Sufi Journey**

The divine reveals to man his Sacred Name as a holy vessel, which carries man from the limited world of his self to the shores of the World of the Spirit where alone man is his Real Self.

Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Self-Awareness and Ultimate Selfhood

The five co-researchers recounted their respective journeys as leading towards wholeness and nondual Self-realization, or in Nasr's terms, the "Real Self." For the co-researchers Janan, Waliye, Nuriyana, Fouad and Rashid, it has allowed them to deepen their understanding of who they are by moving to greater states of realization beyond ego consciousness. The journey has culminated in *fana*, annihilation of the self, and *baqa*,

subsistence in Oneness. This height indicates an existential communion with the Divine in which the spirit is freed from the constraints of ego consciousness. At the station of *baqa* there is no ontological difference between oneself and God, all human attributes have been annihilated in the Divine. This state represents the pinnacle of mystical Love and Union.

The co-researchers have come to this zenith through a psycho-spiritual journey outlined in the eight themes of this study. The themes follow the development of consciousness through the levels of human psychology at the ego level, as well as through spiritual consciousness at transcendent levels. For instance, the first two themes, *Awakening the eye of the heart: A painful opening to self-inquiry* and *The dance of the seeker: Tasting the many 'wines'* capture the development of the self as it begins a process of individuation. The self breaks away from the implicit rules and conditions of its family of origin. All that has been complacently assumed about who they are is in question. This rupture in identity ignites self-inquiry and the desire to know their true Self. Through self-inquiry they confront aspects of themselves, splits, shadow aspects that require integration at the ego-level. The pain that the co-researchers experienced in this theme was found to have an alchemical effect, as it served as a channel for Divine blessings, prompting them towards greater states of realization.

In the third theme, *Invitation to the path: Synchronicity and the Divine hand*, the seeker is invited to the Sufi path. Through a Divine unfolding the path calls them forth and they surrender to this calling. The Sufi path offers practices of *dhikr*, remembrance and invocation of the Divine names, and prayer. The meditation and prayer practices strengthen the ego and allow the psyche to become more integrated. The co-researchers

describe moving into transcendent or spiritual awareness because of the invocation, marking the advent of spiritual growth. The spiritual growth of the aspirant is carried out and secured under the watchful mentorship of the Sheikh. This fourth theme marks the entrance into *dervishhood* and *surrender to the care of the spiritual physician*. The *tariqa*, or Sufi brotherhood in which the dervish is housed secures the transmission of Divine consciousness (*sirr*), which allows the spiritual power and blessings to descend on the aspirant and elevate the dervish in their journey. In the fifth theme “*Know Thyself*”: *polishing the mirror of the heart* the co-researchers enliven their inner world through the invocation, the *dhikr*. The heart, which is their organ of spiritual vision and receptacle of Truth, is polished through the *dhikr* and the immanence of the Divine is perceived at their Center. There is a rejection of the outer world, which is seen as a distraction from Self-realization.

In the sixth theme *Divine witnessing: Unveiling the Self beyond the ego* the world is no longer perceived as a barrier for Self-realization, and does not create distance between the self and God. Rather, in its multiplicity it acts to point to Divine unity. The co-researchers affirm the external world and coalesce it with their inner world. They perceive the fundamental interconnectedness among all things and awaken to an interdependent reality. As the self moves into transcendent states of consciousness one is no longer restricted by concerns for the individual personality or ego. The co-researchers spoke about feeling a great impetus to be in the service of others and to nature. They also note being able to live in the world without ‘being of the world’, in the sense that they do not grasp at, or become attached to manifest existence. This state of Being allows them to practice detached witnessing.

In the last two themes in the Sufi journey, the final veil of separation, or duality, between the self and the Divine Self falls away. In *'Die before you die': Burning in the flames of Divine love*, there is a death of the final attachment to selfhood and subsequently one enters the state of *baqa*. At this point consciousness is transformed from a consciousness of something into a consciousness of everything, including itself, without any ontological distinctions. The eighth and final theme in the Sufi journey is *Subsistence in Oneness: Emergence of the Essential self*. The co-researchers experience a profound Oneness in which all dualisms completely dissolve. This marks the height of nondual Self-realization.

The Sufis describe the spiritual journey as traversing the layers or levels of the *nafs*, the self. Each of the seven levels of the self corresponds to a greater degree of awareness. Jalal ad-Din Rumi vividly describes the transmutation of the self as it is transformed and moves into higher levels of Being. He writes, "I died as mineral and became a plant. I died as plant and rose to animal. I died as animal and I was human" (Chittick, 1983, p. 162). Rumi describes the evolution of consciousness in a hierarchical listing of *more conscious* organisms and beings. In this metaphor he explains that the development of consciousness takes place through cycles of death and rebirth. In each birth one is reborn into a more conscious being, marking a higher degree of realization. The Sufi understanding is such that at each level there is a death or transformation that allows for a rebirth into greater consciousness. Therefore, the development of consciousness is made possible through a transmutation of one's own substance. Rumi continues, "Why should I fear? When was I less by dying? Yet once more I shall die human, to soar with angels blessed above. And when I sacrifice my angel soul I shall

become what no mind ever conceived” (Chittick, 1983, p. 162). At each rebirth one develops a more complete understanding of reality and one’s true nature. For Rumi the mineral self is the first stage in the evolution of consciousness, and represents the base self. The base self or *nafs al-ammara* is understood to be the most limited degree of consciousness on the spectrum. The seventh or highest state of realization is the purified self, *nafs al-safiya*, or pure Spirit, which Rumi describes as a state that “no mind ever conceived.” The co-researchers have pointed to this particular state as subsistence in Oneness.

The final two themes in this study, the states of *fana* and *baqa*, annihilation and subsistence, were particularly challenging for the co-researchers to describe. Many used analogies and approximations to approach this profound state of Being. All of the co-researchers spoke about the precarious nature of this final state. It is important to note that even at the very height of realization the ego remains. It remains as “a functional self that relates to the conventional world” (Wilber, 2000, p. 91). In other words, the ego is not lost in transcendental levels. It is purified of the false constructs it once clung too. Since the ego is retained, there is a propensity that one may fall back under the direction of the ego. Finally, the co-researchers stress that this realization is far beyond the reality of conceptual thought and may only be known experientially.

### **Strengths, Limitations and Ideas for Future Research**

This thesis has explored the Sufi journey as it is experienced today as a living tradition. This inquiry has allowed for an in-depth and sensitive reading of the Sufi journey for a small number of co-researchers. It has added to the larger ongoing conversation within scientific research of the impact spirituality has on healing. Within

the field of transpersonal psychology the lives and experiences of Sufi practitioners have not been studied or elucidated extensively. Therefore, the principal strength of this study lies in having addressed this gap within the literature. Furthermore, this research study has outlined the psycho-spiritual development and personal growth offered by this tradition. In this way the thesis has shed light on the healing practices inherent within Sufism, and its therapeutic potential as a traditional form of psychotherapy.

The principal limitation of this study has been its restriction in length and scope. The research findings are restricted to a small group of five co-researchers. It is important to note that even though this restriction existed (in the number of co-researchers and the specific location of recruitment), universal themes and meanings emerged that were consistent with those found in the literature of Sufism. Many ancient sayings and excerpts from the works of Sufi masters, saints and light-bearers were interwoven in the analysis of the co-researchers' contemporary Sufi journeys. Despite the barriers of time separating these contemporary Sufi practitioners from their medieval counterparts, there are clear parallels in their lived experience. It appears that whether one engages in a Sufi journey in the 9<sup>th</sup> century or the 21<sup>st</sup> century there is a congruency in their experiences as the past, present and future meet together in the moment of Truth; the transcendent space where universal meanings are illuminated through the heart. Finally, this study was a qualitative inquiry and therefore was limited to the parameters of qualitative research.

More focused studies on the healing impacts of Sufism with direct consideration of recovery from illnesses; coping with bereavement or overcoming specific traumatic events would be of benefit. Further studies may examine how these practices effect one's sense of wellbeing using quantitative forms of inquiry. For instance, one could explore

the impact of Sufism on the physiology of the individual. By measuring specific neurological or physiological effects of Sufi practice, such as the impact on blood pressure, blood sugar levels and/or stress levels, it may be possible to assess more concretely their effect on one's physical health. Therefore, future work that incorporates qualitative and quantitative methodologies could offer a more comprehensive examination of the healing benefits of this tradition. The results of these studies would inform the health field and medical community of alternative approaches to medical care.

In addition, further research on the impacts of Sufism and healing may be conducted with direct consideration for the field of psychotherapy. This study has exposed the central healing, meditative and prayer technique within Sufism known as *dhikr*. This technique could eventually be incorporated into treatments, and the outcomes could be explored or measured. Therefore, one could use both a quantitative and qualitative inquiry to measure the success of integrating Sufi practice within the counseling field.

## **Implications for the Health Field**

### ***Lalonde's Conceptualization of the Health Field***

In order to discuss the implications of the findings for the health field, it is first necessary to provide a definition of the field. Marc Lalonde introduced a conceptual framework for the health field in his 1974 report, "the Lalonde report." The report acted as a "map of the health territory" (p. 31), which had not been defined or organized prior to this date. For this reason the health field was extremely difficult to evaluate and discuss. In his report Lalonde outlined the "health field concept" by identifying four categories or "principal elements" that may be considered when examining the

underlying detriments of ill health (p. 33). The four elements are: “human biology, environment, lifestyle and health care organization” (p. 31). In considering these four elements Lalonde proposed a systemic and holistic framework through which health and wellness could be analyzed. Lalonde’s report was also a response to the “biomedically focused and ineffective health care system” (Mitton, 2000, p. 19), which was mostly concerned with curing illness as opposed to offering preventive care.

### ***Care Versus Cure***

Lalonde argues that care is as important as cure for the reason that the majority of health detriments could be reduced through care prevention, which includes change of lifestyle and improving environmental hazards. Lalonde reports that anxiety is a factor in “50% of patients seen in general medical practice” (p. 61). Anxiety and general “despair”, he writes, are linked to high levels of stress and emotional strain from hectic lifestyle demands. Furthermore, he found that suicide was the third greatest cause of death for individuals under the age of 35, behind motor vehicle accidents and other accidents brought on by human error or self-imposed risks including drug and alcohol addictions, obesity, promiscuity and carelessness (p. 16-17). The combination of lifestyle and environmental influences seem to contribute equally to rates of illness and death if not more than human biology. In this way Lalonde emphasizes that “care” should be raised to the same level as “cure”, making prevention the key to reducing death and illness among younger populations (p. 59).

### ***Lifestyle and Environment***

Lifestyle and environment are the two components within the health framework that deal directly with prevention. Within the context of his health framework, Lalonde



(1974) defines lifestyle as “personal decisions and habits” that “create self-imposed risks” and environment as the external matters that have “harmful effects on health” and may be traced to such things as “air, water and noise pollution” (p. 32). These two aspects will be addressed with direct consideration of the findings of this study.

### ***Scientism, Materialism and the Modern Western Lifestyle***

Firstly, lifestyle deals with one’s way of life and mode of being-in-the-world, which is connected to one’s worldview. In the modern West our worldview has been greatly influenced by the scientific paradigm, which has become the dominant mode of inquiry within the last 350 years (Gordon, 2003). The rise of positivism and the empirical sciences has shaped the way we perceive reality and our individual existence within the larger human body. The chief preoccupation of positivism has been “individualism, empiricism” and the “search for objectivity” (Ross, p. 429). The Cartesian model from which positivism emerged proposed a duality, or a subject-object split from which rational and objective knowledge may be produced. There was an underlying desire for a control-orientated method, premised on rationally predicted outcomes, which reduced knowledge to the senses. All things based in the physical and material realm were only *true* and *real*. The reality of the human being was reduced to its most physical aspect and the natural world was understood to be devoid of life and consciousness, marking the dissociation and estrangement of people from nature. Within this paradigm, the natural world became something to dominate and dissect and was approached through a sense of objective separateness. It is not surprising that the scientific revolution emerged at the same time as the industrial revolution, which introduced modern capitalist ideology.

This ideology revolutionized society by making economic determinism the underlying driving force and objective. Under this framework nature was to be utilized and valued for its potential economic gain. Society became premised on competitive, hierarchical and separation-based values (Bishop, 2002, p. 42). In this way, individualism was connected to, and representative of a philosophical and ontological perspective fueled by modern capitalist ideology.

Individualism emphasizes individual gain, egoism, competition and pitting self-interests against the common good (Ross, 1991). Dorothy Ross, a prominent historian writing on the economic past notes, “capitalist individualism destroyed egalitarian and fraternal values” (1991, p. 105). Society had been transformed into an individualistic one; one in which people “maximize their private material self-interest” (Ball, 2001, p. 57).

### ***Individualism, Egotism and Ill-health***

From the standpoint of Sufism the emphasis on individualism and egocentric gain is dangerous for individual and societal health. For this reason, this study has an important implication for the health field, which is directly related to the lifestyle component of Lalonde’s “health field concept.” If people continue living with the perception of separateness and in competition with others, this will induce and create perpetual suffering, isolation and alienation. Additionally, materialism reduces the reality of the human being to its physiological dimension, which furthermore compounds the sense of isolation and meaninglessness. In perceiving oneself as an independent, isolated entity moving through the world without a teleological end or greater purpose, it is no wonder that there is a rise in mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression and suicide, all of which are well documented within the health field today. Modern scientific

materialism as well as capitalism have been two dominant forces in the West that present an autonomous and boundaried ideal of the self. Kenneth Smith, a philosopher and artist notes,

The fallacy of modern atomistic individualism is of course not just our "tabula rasa" self-deception but also our ego-mythical "social contract": if every member of modern society is supposed autonomously and privately to think through for himself the most vital and fundamental (normative, evaluative, principled) issues of his life -- i.e. to undertake primal self-formation utterly on his own and outside the purview of parents/peers/education/media etc. -- then of course the vast majority will never advance past point A or B, whatever is most obvious, blatant, and simplistic. (Smith, 1973)

Identifying solely with the individualistic ego-self is understood to contribute to a restricted sense of self-purpose and identity that effects our wellbeing, and impacts how we interact with our world.

Transpersonal psychology has outlined the developmental spectrum of human consciousness through ten stages of realization. At the half-way point in this spectrum marks the development of a personal ego consciousness, which is an important stage in one's development, yet nonetheless needs to be transcended. According to transpersonal psychology the self-possessed ego is directed towards gratifying none other than itself and through such movement only perpetuates suffering and the constriction of its own being. The psychologist Will Adams writes,

The ego is an objectified self-image rather than a real subject, an adaptive social mask or partial (or false) defensive self that we construct in reaction to life

circumstances. Thus it can never be sovereign or complete. As long as we are exclusively identified with our supposedly separate ego, we will always be haunted by a sense of lack and unreality. (Adams, 2010, p. 43)

For this reason realizing human potential comes through integrating physical, mental and spiritual dimensions of reality that are transegoic in nature. These transcendent states of being allow the aspirant to move beyond the alienated and isolation of individualism to “a self-realization of wholeness and interconnectedness with ontological oneness” (Kuhn, 2001, p.22). Going beyond the ego involves moving from an independent and isolated way of being to a co-operative, relational and *interdependent* one.

### ***A Holistic Lifestyle Offered through Sufism***

In this study the co-researchers found Sufism to provide a spiritual outlet for which its practices, worldview and communal aspect facilitated transcendent states of consciousness. The co-researchers shared the healing experienced by perceiving the deep connectedness to other people and the world around them. They described a shift in their mode of being from one that was individualistic, which focused on fusing the splits and fragmentations within the self, to then gradually moving beyond the separate self to a perception of their embeddedness in the Oneness of creation. Will Adam’s observation about Buddhist practice could equally apply to Sufi practice as it involves “realizing and compassionately actualizing our nondual participation and identity with others and the world” (2010, p. 39). Sufi psychology is a variety of transpersonal psychology or spiritual psychotherapy as it brings people to optimal heights of wellness and fulfillment. What sets Sufism apart from other contemplative traditions, in its approach to self-realization, is that it does not require or encourage a model of social renunciation. Instead

it emphasizes being fully engaged in all aspects of life, having a family, working, being a community member and contributor to society. Sufism emphasizes the connection between the health of the individual and the health of society. In this way, the realized Sufi is a valuable member of society; she has an interest in serving the greater community and has moved beyond self-interest. The Sufi lifestyle includes spiritual practices and a worldview that allows the human being to move into transpersonal awareness. According to the co-researchers this awareness has brought greater joy, ease and wholeness to their lives. Perhaps by adopting Sufism as a lifestyle it can offer the *care* Lalonde was writing about; and may alleviate anxiety, depression and even prevent suicide and high-risk behaviors like drug and alcohol addiction.

### **Implications for the Environmental Crisis**

A secondary implication of this study concerns the environment, which is one of the four components of Lalonde's health field concept. Lalonde wrote that external factors like pollution have harmful effects on one's health (1974). Today we are facing a global environmental crisis that is impacting climate change. It is compromising agriculture and food supplies, depleting fossil fuels, and damaging water and air quality. This crisis is not only harmful to our health but is also detrimental to the entire ecosystem. Some researchers from the University of Lethbridge recently published a forty-seven year study on the Devon Island Ice Cap. In their research they concluded that the large ice mass in the Canadian High Arctic is shrinking and thinning, affecting the rise in sea level (Boon, et al., 2010). According to transpersonal psychology the ecological crisis reflects the disconnection from one's Essential self, which includes an intimate connection to the natural world.

The collective narcissism that developed from the materialistic and scientific worldview espoused a narrow egocentric human centeredness, which severed the connection and reverence of the natural world as a living breathing body. In the words of Will Adams (2010) who writes, “when our relations with the rest of nature are determined by our ego-centered subjectivity and world-view, we abdicate the fullness of our being and tend to desecrate the natural world” this is because the “ego’s craving for self-sufficiency is intrinsically insatiable” (Adams, 2010, p. 43). When we live only from the perspective of the personal ego, we are driven by fear and greed, “and our destructive acts flow from this grave confusion. Not realizing this we will exploit tree after tree, or something or someone else” (Adams, 2010, p. 43).

The environmental crisis is the most compelling sign of the destructive effects of materialism and modernity. Ken Wilber argues that the ecological crisis is the result of “a rampant and vulgar materialism” (2000, p. 59). There is little doubt that modern materialism has produced a worldview that encourages a dominating attitude towards the natural world. The deep ecologist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century John Muir observed that most people are living “on the world but not in it” (Turner, 2000, p. 111). From the perspective of materialism, nature is viewed as a commodity that can be used virtually without restriction to ensure that our life continues to be “comfortable” and “affordable,” and that our reliance upon material goods is not disrupted. David Jardine (1989) alleges that the act of severing our connection to the earth creates a worldview wherein the earth becomes “a meaningless objective mechanism which is at the disposal of our whim and consumptive fantasies.” He continues by arguing, “as the earth loses its humus, its living, generative character, the subject loses its humanity by losing the connectedness with

humus out of which it has emerged” (p. 26). For Jardine, the objectification and domination of nature cannot, it seems, be separated from the loss of our humanity – a humanity that is formed in part by our intimate connection with a living natural environment.

The Perennialist philosopher, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, who recognized the dangers posed by the environmental crisis more than forty years ago, provided a penetrating explanation for its fundamental origin. He identified the very root cause of this crisis to lie in the excessive “exteriorization” of the human being, an exteriorization which cannot be separated from the modern world. He argues that the turn towards materialism marked a stage in the unfolding of history in which the human being lost touch with his or her spiritual reality, as well as with the higher principles and inner teachings of the world’s great religions. Nasr writes,

For a humanity turned towards outwardness by the very processes of modernization, it is not so easy to see that the blight wrought upon the environment is in reality an externalization of the destitution of the inner state of the soul of that humanity whose actions are responsible for the ecological crisis. (1967, p. 3)

According to Nasr, the “dstitution of the inner state of the soul” is reflected in the ecological crisis. The materialistic and scientific reduction has removed the metaphysical, spiritual and transcendent reality from the possibility of human realization. When the Spirit is lost, what remains is only *form*, bearing a lifeless uninspired quality. The perspectives held by Sufism and transpersonal psychology argue that in order for the environment to improve and to be restored, humanity needs to be resuscitated through

Spirit, by transcending material and ego-centered self-interest. By transcending the exclusivity of ego consciousness, the co-researchers were able to “open to the fullness of being human, which intrinsically involves being-in-relation-with-others” and includes realizing one’s interconnectedness with the natural world (Adams, 2010, p. 46).

Transcending the ego liberates the human being from its narcissistic promptings, and allows them to open into nondual and transpersonal realization. The healing experienced at this level is continuous between one’s inner and outer worlds. In other words, the fruit of this correspondence is witnessed in the reverence for the natural world, and of course recommitting to consciously care for its wellbeing.

### **Implications for the Counseling Field**

In western psychology healthy development requires the integration of body and mind, whereas in transpersonal streams it requires the integration of body, mind and spirit (Vaughan, 1985). According to transpersonal psychology, without the healthy integration at these three levels the human being is not able to realize their full potential. Existential angst, meaninglessness and nihilism are the likely outcomes of an undeveloped spirituality (Vaughan, 1985). It is for this reason that turning to a spiritual tradition, such as Sufism, offers the human being an understanding of their spiritual reality, a framework and tools to develop and integrate this dimension fully and healthily.

Sufism encourages the human being to live a life of authenticity and wholeness. Amineh Amelia Pryor (2000) who writes on Sufi psychology explains that the transformational journey in Sufism requires that we move “by degrees or stages towards our perfect center” (p. 53). The realization of one’s center is the goal of Sufism and the pinnacle of Self-realization, since, it is at one’s center where we meet God and actualize



our transpersonal identity. Pryor (2000) explains that from the Sufi perspective everything is illusory except our own Being or center, “which is hidden beyond the senses and emotions of physical reality” (p.23). She adds, “through specific practices and the guidance of a knowledgeable teacher, we learn to move from the external distractions to the permanent and eternal knowledge of our Being” (p. 23). Nasr (1991) reiterates this point when he explains that the human being “seeks his psychic and spiritual needs outwardly precisely because he does not know who he is” (p. 3). He notes that “Sufism reminds man to seek all that he needs inwardly within himself, to tear his roots from the outer world and plunge them in the Divine Nature, which resides at the center of his heart” (1991, p. 3). In the development of the self beyond the ego, one transcends one’s attachments to a purely material and physical reality, and re-orient oneself to the innermost reality of Spirit. By experiencing this reality one is able to let go of attachments to manifest existence that are responsible for perpetuating a cycle of suffering, which the Eastern traditions refer to as *samsara*.

According to Sufism the need for realizing this center cannot be overstated. Amidst the fragmentation of the world the human being seeks out a center, a permanent and enduring certitude that offers reassurance and security. Frithjof Schuon explains the need for a center as such:

in order to be happy, man must have a center; now, this center is above all the certitude of the One... he who lives in the Inward, that is, who remains motionless in his contemplative inwardness—his being if one will...[is] moving towards his infinite center. (1992, p. 5)

It is because of the separation from our center that we experience emotional suffering and a general sense of purposelessness (Shafii, 2008). Pain calls us to discover its origin and remedy. For instance, pain in our stomach would lead us to seek medical attention to find its remedy. Similarly, the pain of separation that manifests itself in the form of existential angst calls us to find its source as well. It is precisely by exploring this pain that the Sufis believe one might encounter their center, and at once, discover lasting relief.

The primary implication for the counseling field that has emerged from this research is found in approaching Sufism as its own unique existential, humanistic and transpersonal psychology. Sufism is an ancient psychology that addresses the questions that are central to any counseling philosophy or psychology. For instance, it holds an assumption about the nature of the human being, the causes of ill health, the curative factors, the therapeutic relationship and the measurement of individual progress. It maintains the belief that every human being contains within them the same realizable potential and suggests that the human being has the resources they need to become Self-realized. Beyond the theoretical framework Sufism offers, it is also a way of praxis that requires gaining knowledge through experience. Rollo May (1983) poignantly observed that the “patient needs an experience not an explanation” (p. 158). The role of the teacher in Sufism is to facilitate experiential knowledge for the student and point them towards realizing Oneness. The teacher prompts the student towards healing through a process of *interiorization* in which the student discovers their “inner teacher” or center, which is their only source of permanent sustenance and sustained wellbeing.

Sufism offers a theoretical framework and practical tools that can lead to a greater realization of wholeness. The personal growth, healing and self-realization facilitated by

Sufism, unearthed in this research, argues for further investigation into the healing potential offered through this spiritual tradition. In addition, future research in this area might reveal that the meditative and healing techniques unique to Sufism could eventually be used for clinical intervention.

### **Final Reflections**

The bread of every experience offers nourishment.

Jalal ad-Din Rumi, The Essential Rumi

My journey through the research and writing of this thesis has offered tremendous nourishment and personal growth. In the closing section of this thesis I would like to highlight some of the valuable insights I have gained from this experience. I will reflect on my situatedness within this study as an implicated researcher and share how it has transformed my own field of understanding.

Within qualitative inquiry the researcher herself is the instrument of the study and it is through her personal filters that the research is carried out. As the *instrument* of this study, I have approached this inquiry through my personal lens. Through the filters of my understanding I have analyzed, interpreted, and drawn out meaning from the data, and through a collaborative exchange with five willing co-researchers, have engaged in an interpretive process that has led to a mutual understanding of the topic. In other words, this role has required me to be tremendously open and receptive to the frame of reference of the co-researchers in order to reach a “fusion of horizons”, which is the summation of the hermeneutic circle and the height of understanding (Rodgers, 2005, p. 149).

To be an implicated researcher, I feel, requires making oneself open and vulnerable to the transformative potential of the research process. Barrett (2007) writes,

“learning to analyze and interpret qualitative data also involves a transformation of the researcher as the primary instrument for making sense of the phenomenon under study” (p. 417). I found that during the research process I underwent a significant reshaping of my being, in which my pre-existing frame of reference was transformed. Gadamer describes the broadening of one’s horizon as the development of an “enlarged self” in which one’s previous understanding and perspective is transformed. The most prominent aspect of transformed understanding I walk away with relates to perceiving the fundamental unity of existence and the deep interconnectedness of all things through this unity. I have found that much of the perfection and wholeness human beings search for in the world reflects the wholeness they desire in their own self. I believe that our lasting sustenance comes through realizing our own inner perfection, and reconnecting with our Center.

On both personal and professional levels this journey has re-awakened the concern I have for the health and wellbeing of all people. I have found that it is in the experiential realization of human interconnectedness that one finds tremendous healing. Although the ever-present Oneness of Reality is not an obvious truth to many, I believe that it is manifested in the hearts of every human being as a single intention, which is the quest for wholeness. Through my research I have become more cognizant of the worldview that has shaped the modern context I am living in today and its effects on my wellbeing. Under the modern paradigm of scientism and the attractive force of materialism many of us feel unfulfilled, constricted and fall easily to despair. This is because we are unable to find satisfaction through what materialism offers as a worldview. This general dissatisfaction is compounded by the effects of an overly

stimulated and highly sensory driven culture, which through its *exteriorizing* tendency, prevents us from establishing a connection with our true self. It is difficult to perceive anything beyond the conditions of this worldview, and its instruction on reality.

In Frithjof Capra's (1982) *The Turning Point* he argues that an underlying assumption of the modern scientific paradigm is that the individual is an entity separate from his environment, which includes the natural world and the rest of humanity. This perspective leads to depersonalization because anything that is other than the individual becomes an object to be controlled, manipulated and to be used for personal gain. This sense of a separate-self existence is perpetuated by the emphasis on individualism, which has overlooked the apparent and seemingly inherent reality of interconnectedness, an interconnectedness that mysticism has elucidated for millennia. Ironically, in recent years it has been in the discoveries of science that point to both: the unity of Reality, and the fundamental interconnectedness of all things through this Reality. Thus, according to Capra (1982) both mysticism and science have pointed to, at a very deep subtle level, the unity behind the multiplicity. Science has proven that a constant exchange of energy is taking place between subatomic particles of both seemingly inanimate and animate objects. At the level of subatomic particles there are no real barriers or distinctions between one phenomenon and the next. In this way, the fundamental truth of unity is visible at the deepest sub nuclear level of reality.

Another pertinent understanding I walk away with has to do with epistemological claims. In order to realize the fundamental truth of Unity, it requires a transformation in awareness. To merely read and theorize about this Truth is to be confined to a purely intellectual understanding of it. For this reason I am acutely sensitive to the limitations

which language poses for the inquiry undertaken in this study. Although the conceptual discussions presented in this thesis have elucidated the experience of Oneness at the height of the Sufi journey, they do not, however, provide real knowledge of Reality – as certain knowledge lies in the experiential tasting of *It*. In other words, the chief epistemological implication of this work rests on the fact that nondual Self-realization comes through a spiritual and transcendent mode of inquiry. Therefore, this journey has validated my personal assumption that knowledge and insight may be accessed through intuitive and spiritual faculties.

Finally, this research project has been another page in the unfolding of my own personal journey. In working with the co-researchers I felt my own journey towards Self-realization reflected in theirs. What emerged from this correspondence was a deepening in my awareness of the interconnectedness of all things to that very singular point of Essence -- an Essence we all share, and are joined by. I have found that the human desire for wholeness is a universal yearning, and that by turning to the perennial wisdom, the great teachers and mystics of the world's great religions, one is offered tools and guidance to transcend the suffering and contraction of the limitations of selfhood. This research project has allowed me to revisit my own journey towards healing, and in doing so has deepened my awareness of my potential for realizing the "fullness of my being" in transcendent and nondual states.

The final insight I have gained from this thesis work is the paradoxical nature of the nondual journey. Although it is possible to pass the threshold and realize nondual awareness, the paradox of the journey is such that it is ongoing. Insofar as the Divine Self is infinitely vast, it follows that one can never reach a final or terminal point of Self-

realization. In other words, the journey does not have a final destination, without beginning or end there is only the present moment. To close, I would like to share the following passage by Rumi, who captures the paradoxical nature of the journey. A journey that both offers tremendous nourishment and yet calls the human being towards this very nourishment. He writes,

Every thirst gets satisfied except that of these fish, the mystics, who swim a vast ocean of grace still somehow longing for it! No one lives in that without being nourished every day. (Barks, 1997, p.19)

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## Appendices

### *Appendix A: Posted Announcement*

Research into the Lived Experience of Sufi Practitioners

#### VOLUNTEER PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Principal Researcher: Lauren Julia Boni, M.Sc. (Student)

Research Supervisor: Dr. Gary Nixon Ph.D.

This Master's thesis study through the University of Lethbridge involves two 2-3 hour interviews with Sufi practitioners who have been practicing Sufism for at least five years.

The co-researchers that will be selected for this study will have had peak, mystical or non-dual experiences that have promoted and/or deepened their spiritual development.

If this describes your experience and you are interested in being included as a co-researcher in this Master's thesis, please contact Lauren Julia Boni for more information.

CALL: 905-273-3975

EMAIL: [Lauren.boni@uleth.ca](mailto:Lauren.boni@uleth.ca)

*Appendix B: Circulated Email*

Dear Members of the Canadian Sufi Cultural Center,

I am a student in the Master of Science degree program at the University of Lethbridge. I am conducting a study entitled “The Lived Experience of Sufi Practitioners on their Journey Towards Nondual Self-realization.” This research project is being carried out under the supervision of Dr. Gary Nixon. The intent of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding of Sufi practice and the methods of growth and healing that are intrinsic to this path.

Participation in this study will involve two (2-3 hour) interviews that will be digitally recorded. During the interviews you will be asked to share your journey on the path of Sufism, beginning with the turning points that caused you to embrace this path, and the experiences that have brought you to where you are today.

I invite you to contact me if you have been engaged in Sufi practice continuously for the last 5 years, during which you have had peak, mystical, or nondual experiences you would like to share. Please contact me for more information about this study at (905) 273-3975 or by email at [Lauren.boni@uleth.ca](mailto:Lauren.boni@uleth.ca).

Thank-you kindly,

Lauren Julia Boni

M.Sc. Student (Health Sciences)

University of Lethbridge

### ***Appendix C: Consent Form***

April 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009

Dear Participant:

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled “The Lived Experience of Sufi Practitioners on their Journey Towards Nondual Self-realization.” The principal researcher is Lauren Boni, a graduate student who is working under the academic supervision of Dr. Gary Nixon from the School of Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge. This research project is in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science degree in Health Sciences at the University of Lethbridge. The intent of this study is to acquire a deeper understanding of Sufi practice and the methods of growth and healing that are intrinsic to this path.

Participation will involve two in-person interviews conducted by Lauren Boni, in which you will be asked to describe your experiences on the Sufi path. The initial interview will last approximately 2-3 hours, followed by a 1 hour interview at a later date. During the second interview you will be asked to add, delete and/or confirm information about your experience, as well, this will be an opportunity for you to remove any information you may feel compromises your anonymity. The interview will be held in a comfortable and quiet setting that will be mutually agreed upon. The location of the interview will ensure your privacy and confidentiality. With your consent, the researcher will digitally record and transcribe both interviews to allow for a more thorough reading of your experience.

You are asked to freely and voluntarily consent to participate in this study. It is your right to withdraw from the study at any time, without reason. There is a small risk that you may feel uncomfortable sharing your personal experiences, at which time you may choose to discontinue the interview. A list of counsellors will be provided to you at each interview if, and in case, you may choose to seek support of this kind.

Your participation will be an invaluable endowment to this study, as you will contribute to the furthering of the understanding of the Sufi journey and its healing capacity. Although there is no monetary compensation associated with your involvement in this study, you may find it beneficial to discuss your experiences with the researcher. As well, a summary of the study's findings will be available to you upon request.

Participation in this study will be kept confidential, and your identity will remain completely anonymous. To maintain anonymity, a self-selected pseudonym will be used in place of your name. Under no circumstance will identifying information be disclosed in either the verbal or written dissemination of this study. The interview transcripts as well as identifying documents will be kept in a locked filing cabinet that will only be accessible to the researcher, Lauren Boni, and the academic supervisor, Dr. Gary Nixon. The digital recordings and interview transcripts will be retained for a five-year period after the completion of the study, at which time they will be appropriately disposed.

The results of this study will be written as a Master's Thesis and will be presented to the researcher's Committee and colleagues. Beyond their inclusion in the Master's thesis, the results may be published in academic journals, presented at conferences and /or to university classes.

If you have any questions or desire further information with respect to this study, you may contact Lauren Boni, the principal researcher, at (403) 329-3804 or [lauren.boni@uleth.ca](mailto:lauren.boni@uleth.ca). Inquiries may also be directed to the academic supervisor, Dr. Gary Nixon at (403) 329- 2644 or [gary.nixon@uleth.ca](mailto:gary.nixon@uleth.ca). If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Office of Research Services at the University of Lethbridge at (403) 329- 2431.

Sincerely,

Lauren Boni

M.Sc. Candidate (Health Sciences)

University of Lethbridge

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I freely consent to participate in the study entitled, "The Lived Experience of Sufi Practitioners on their Journey Towards Nondual Self-realization."

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Date

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Participant's Name

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Participant's Signature

I also consent to have my interview digitally recorded by the interviewer.

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Date

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Participant's Name

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Participant's Signature