

There Is No Sufi Here

Shaykha Tasnim Hermila Fernandez—Sufism, and The Dances of Universal Peace

Interview appeared in Sacred Fire Magazine

By Jonathan Merritt, 2007 (Rev. 1/2010)

If you drive through the streets of a city or look in the phone book, you never see or find a Sufi center. In fact, if it were not for the relatively recent translations of the ecstatic poetry of Rumi and Hafiz, notably by Coleman Barks and Daniel Ladinsky, and the National Geographic specials on the whirling dervishes, there might not be any awareness of the Sufis among us. They are the hidden ones.

"There's an old saying, 'You can never find a Sufi because the Sufi does not exist,' Shaykha Tasnim Fernandez tells me. "Sufism is a practice and a state of being. It is something we do and become in the act of doing—so that the self is continually being effaced and, at the same time, becoming one with All, becoming All-ness. So the Sufi might be the guy driving the cab or standing behind the counter at the bakery or the woman sitting at the corporate reception desk. They are veiled; yet, you recognize something about them, their connection to something very deep."

JM: *From the beginning of our telephone conversation, I recognize that Shaykha Tasnim is a person with a very rich and deep connection with the Divine. Her lifelong quest for that connection led her through the study and practice of Hermetics, Alchemy, Vedanta, Kundalini Yoga, Judaism, Tibetan Buddhism, Hinduism, Huichol Shamanism, Mystical Christianity and Islam. She serves as a representative of the Sufi Order International. Since 1975 she has been a leader and teacher spreading the Dances of Universal Peace. She is a Healing Conductor and Cherag (minister) of the Universal Worship for the Church of All. In 2000 she was ordained as a Sirag (one who is enabled and authorized to train and ordain new ministers).*

"At the same time the lineage is alive," she continues. "It is living because of the connection that the teacher gives to the disciple through initiation. The initiate connects intimately with those beings who have walked the path of the Sufis before him/her. One passes through one's teacher who is effaced in her teacher, who is effaced in his teacher, and so on back in time."

"One way to look at it is to think of a drop of water as an individuated being. I am that drop. So if I surrender into the ocean, I completely disappear. I, as an individual, die. There is nothing identifiable as me. That's the fear people confront when they face annihilation. Yet, at the same time that drop becomes immersed and dispersed into the whole ocean. It *becomes*, in a sense, the ocean itself."

"This begins to approach what a Sufi is. It is a station, a way of being, so that those who have the capacity to know will recognize it and say, 'Ah, there is a Sufi. There is a Khalif Allah, a representative of Allah.' The Sufi is so empty because she/he doesn't exist as an individual ego, a self-identified person. At the same time they become so expanded, an ocean of love, the ocean of mercy. They reflect God's names; God's qualities and attributes perfectly, and they reflect everyone. Can you imagine a world where sufficient human beings were immersed in that depth? Let's envision, that, please."

JM: *Shaykha Tasnim has been diving into that depth since Hazrat Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan, who was then head of the Sufi Order International, initiated her into the way of the Sufis in 1971. I can't help but remark on how remarkable that was, that at a time when youths were breaking down every type of structure, disordering order, she, as a young woman, was submitting to a master, committing herself to an ancient order. I can't help but comment on how, these days, people seem to think that they can simply pick and chose the things they like from various traditions and cobble together a workable spiritual path, that traditions and teachers are superfluous on the individual road to enlightenment, that intention is all that matters.*

“Well, we must always encourage the seeker in his longing,” she gently admonishes me. “Who is the seeker but God hungering for connection with God? Yet, at a certain point, a person can only guide himself so far. Then he or she needs someone with greater experience and wisdom. Initially, it might not seem so, because we don’t know that we don’t know. There is a little bit of squeak room. But once the seeker reaches a certain level of introspection and discernment, he/she is going to need a teacher.”

“The teacher needs to be someone with more experience who can see where the seeker is on the path and who can inspire the seeker’s submission and obedience. The seeker needs to be able to refine and discipline their ego desires so that their relationship with the teacher is one of trust, of love, of sharing wisdom that is not the teacher’s nor the seeker’s but that awakens the divine knowing that is in their hearts. The purpose is to reconnect to that source that the seeker has never been apart from, to awaken divine qualities that are already there so the seeker becomes more real and more capacious. And, as that capacity increases, the seeker starts to see that it is God acting through him-herself and the world. God is the ‘doer’. The spiritual relationship is of utmost importance because it allows transformation from the ‘unreal’ to the Real.”

JM: I had long been under the impression that Sufism predated Islam and, given that it is actively suppressed in many Islamic nations, that it is somehow separate from Islam.

“All religions are man-made”, Shaykha Tasnim says. “ We forget that. Jesus (Peace be upon him), did not come to found a church, capital C—the Christian church or the Christian religion. He came to awaken the people, to give them a message from God, to speak to them in a way they could understand. Given his audience, he used a lot of agrarian metaphors— mustard seed, fig tree and vine. They knew what a mustard seed was. The important thing is that the messenger connects the message to the immediate experience of those who are to receive the message.”

“In the Koran, those who delivered the message, known and unknown, are said to number one hundred twenty-four thousand. One hundred twenty-four thousand simply indicates that the number of messengers is large, not that it is limited to this specific amount—innumerable, really. For instance, I can cite Buddha, Moses, Krishna, Mohammed, Jesus, etcetera —I can count thirty, forty, fifty Messengers. One hundred twenty-four thousand and more messengers have spoken to the created ones since the first breath was given to Adam. Ultimately, only God knows.”

“This Sufi order that I represent, founded in 1910 by Hazrat Inayat Khan, explicitly recognizes Moses, Abraham, Zarathustra, Mary, Hagar, Esther and on and on. How can one not recognize them all? A more subtle point is that if we use the word “Sufism” (or Tasawwuf in Arabic), that specific term refers to Islamic mysticism. But the Wisdom that has taken the name of Sufism, has always existed. And, yes, gnosis, or mystical knowledge goes back beyond recorded time. You can see traces of it in Egyptian mystery schools and in other ancient traditions. It has always been there.”

“In that sense, I can say Sufism with a small ‘s’ extends beyond Islam. And yet, in another sense, it is nothing but Islam. It is not Kabbalah, Jewish mysticism; nor is it any other mysticism than Islamic mysticism. And that may be hard for people who don’t know much at all about Islam, yet still insist that Sufism is not connected to Islam. So sometimes it’s easier to just use the term ‘mysticism.’”

“The Sufis have a very evolved science and art of personal transformation, of taking the self from those totally animalistic instinctual desire-based actions and reactions, to the most exalted state of human being. Sufism is a path of heart. I know that is an easy catch phrase. But since people don’t know what we mean when we say heart, they think that it excludes the mind. But the mind and the heart, in a manner of speaking, are the same thing. Hazrat Inayat Khan, who brought Sufism to the west, has an aphorism. ‘Mind is the surface of the heart, and heart is the depth of the mind.’ And in Sufism, when we speak about heart, there are seven different degrees or levels or subtleties that we call heart in various forms. Yes, it is a path of the heart, and in one system it involves seven levels of purification. It allows a transformation that returns us to our birthright.”

JM: *Years ago, I experienced a little of that transformation when I began attending the **Dances of Universal Peace** that were being held in a cave on the island of Kauai. Previously, I had been engaged in a low level of political activism—organizing poetry readings for various causes and attending peace marches. While I was adamantly nonviolent, the question of violence was never far away. And in my work there was an overriding sense of fear that manifested as righteousness, as opposition and confrontation.*

When I was first invited to join the Dances for of Universal Peace, I was skeptical, even cynical about the prospect that dancing together, looking into each other's eyes and singing sacred songs could have any effect on the powers that ruled the world. What I experienced, though, was a deep connection and powerful loving kindness among the people with whom I danced.

Shaykha Tasnim tells me, “The central transformative aspect of the dances has to do with the sacred phrases. Those can either be a name of a revered master, saint, or prophet, or a phrase that has come from any of the world's sacred scriptures. When they are sung or spoken, there is potency in the vibration, as well as an amassing of energy through repetition. So when people enunciate those sounds together, it multiplies the effect. As Jesus said, ‘When two or more are gathered in my name—in my sound, in my vibration—I am there.’ When a group of people intones a holy name, then that presence comes. It is an invocation.”

“The rhythm is also a powerful piece. The dances have structure. So, when the group is intoning and chanting together, and also using their bodies and moving in/with conscious intention, then this moving together in consonance also helps unify the field. As people become familiar and more comfortable with the choreography and with singing in languages they may not understand, they can then focus more on the state of their own state of consciousness.”

“All of this is subtle. In a partner dance, for instance, everyone is moving together and singing the same phrase but each person you meet is like a whole different world. Even though we've set up some parameters, we're still vibrating at a different rate. A skilled dancer who meets a new dancer in the circle can modify his rate of vibration to meet the new dancer's rate, then adjust that rate to help raise the new dancer's vibration. The experienced dancer slowly lifts the new dancer into resonance and connection with herself and with the community. If the new dancer has that experience of being lifted into connection, in two hours, that alters her *makam* (station or level), her everyday-consciousness. And, so she feels expanded. Perhaps she experiences a deeper or higher feeling about herself, emotionally.”

“The trick is integrating that expanded state so it isn't just a fleeting ‘high’ that doesn't serve anything. Through repetition of the dance experience, through familiarity with the basic dynamics, one gains the freedom to focus on one's own state and intention. One is learning how to access and apply exactly that expansiveness in everyday life. In that way, perhaps, the dances might bring about a greater peace in the community.”

JM: *Although I only attended the dances for about six months and didn't seek out another Dance for Universal Peace after I left Kauai, one phrase, ‘Ishk Allah, ma'abood l'Llah,’ has stayed with me for twenty years. I saw my chance to find out what it means.*

Shaykha Tasnim explains, “The whole phrase says—in a poor translation because Arabic is so rich—‘God is love, lover and beloved.’ But the love is a particular kind of love that we don't have a word for in English. One image, and this is pretty strong, is of a vine that begins to wind itself around another plant or tree and it is so powerful that it completely takes over, swallows up, and consumes the other plant. It completely obliterates any ‘other’ presence than itself. There is no ‘other.’ There is only one unity, only One Reality.”

“If god is the lover and the beloved between whom this dynamic Love experience happens, then where are you? What's your place in all that? Does it not include you? Are you at one pole or

another? Are you standing outside? You get subsumed in that phrase. So the beloved is all—the lover is nothing, on one hand. But we say that God, is the love, the lover, and the beloved. How can the lover be nothing? There is no beloved without the lover. The lover is the one who extols and uplifts and idolizes and worships and serves the ideal, the beloved. The lover is critically necessary, and is none other than God. God is the doer. So, it's in giving up the idea that 'we', or 'I' do something, in surrendering, that is where the erasing of the ego identification may take place—God willing. The Sufi poet would say, that is where the drop becomes the ocean.”

“This effacement of the personal self, the small self that would claim all power to itself in regard to decision making turns that petty tyrant more into a servant. In Arabic, the word, jihad, means struggle. And there are two types of jihad—the lesser, which is the outward struggle against the outer circumstance, the enemy or oppressor; and the greater jihad is the inner struggle which is you against your demanding ego. That's where the battle is: the battle of overcoming our pettiness, arrogance, self-centered absorption and vices. That is a more “holy war” than anything external. But the benefit of overcoming is not only personal – it advances the health of the whole humanity.”

###