



THE MIRROR OF CONSCIOUSNESS

AN AMERICAN ETHNOGRAPHER IN A SUFI COMMUNITY

By JOHN L. CAUGHEY

It was raining hard that night as we drove through mountain passes on our way to the tomb of the Sufi saint Baba Lal Shah. Our old car was decorated by several small green flags stuck on the front and back fenders signaling that we were Sufis on a pilgrimage. The sometimes single-lane back road to Kashmir was wet and slippery and partly washed out here and there. At the edge of the road, with no guardrails, there were huge drops down into the dark valley far below. I was sitting in the front next to the driver. The Sufi *Murshid*, or teacher we called Shah Jii and two of his disciples were in the back. The younger one, like me, was tense. But Shah Jii seemed as serene and peaceful as ever. The driver grinned and said in broken English, “Here, easy to get ticket to hell.” We all laughed.

When we stopped at a dimly lit tea stall along the side of the road, the young disciple started complaining about the rain, the bad roads and the problems we might have at the upcoming official checkpoint. Shah Jii looked at him and said, “What difficulties? Difficulties are what make travel amusing.” While I was struck by this teaching—how different from the impatient ways most American travelers handle their problems—I too was worried about the checkpoint. It came up soon. Through the wet windshield, I could see that the way ahead was blocked by a white barrier lowered across the road. Several men in khaki uniforms armed with rifles stepped out of the shed and looked at us carefully as we approached. I was anxious because we did not have official travel papers. However, I knew that by tuning into his own consciousness, Shah Jii had received several mysterious spiritual “indications and inclinations” (*ashara*) about the trip. That

was why we were following this particular route, and that was why he had chosen not to obtain the papers ordinarily required to pass through this official checkpoint.

Attention to indications and inclinations was an important practice among these Sufis, one they often referred to as the “mirror of consciousness.” In this essay I will describe what I learned about the mirror of consciousness and what I see as its implications for Western understandings and practices. I had the opportunity to study this practice in 1977 when I was a Fulbright Lecturer at Quaid-i-Azam University in Islamabad, Pakistan.¹

Political troubles had shut down the university and I had plenty of time to pursue my fieldwork with one of the groups of Sufis associated with the village of Nurpur (Place of Light) and the tomb of the Sufi Saint, Buri Imam. At the time I was a fairly experienced ethnographer, and I knew how to explore the beliefs of this unfamiliar cultural world through interviewing and participant observation. But I didn’t know much about how to live my life, and when I first met Shah Jii and the Sufis I was deeply drawn to them.

A friend and I had been curious about a flickering point of light in the hills above the village, and one day we decided to walk up there to see what was going on. At the top of the steep, rocky trail, we reached a shallow, white washed cave and a few small huts. It felt truly amazing. Here in the cave and along the cliff edge walkway were a group of pilgrims, enjoying the beauty of the day. The place had a light, free and easy feel. The women had removed their veils; people were smiling and happy. Great pots of rice and curry were cooking on open fires. Huge green banners waved in the light breeze.

The holy men, dressed in multicolored rag jackets, beads and rings were pursuing their own spiritual path in freedom and wildness, far outside the world of mosques and orthodox Islam.

Sitting on a carpet in the cave, surrounded by children and pilgrims was the head *fakir* or *Murshid*. He had the wildest, most serene hawk-like presence. We sat down to talk. The people there must have been surprised at these strange American foreigners, but they were welcoming and friendly and answered our questions openly:

Yes, Buri Imam came here to meditate and often stayed for days. Now pilgrims come here when they are concerned about their health, their farms or shops or their spiritual life. They pray to Buri and may leave written prayer requests like those hung on the wall—and he may grant their requests. And, I will pray for them if they ask. And yes, these men are my helpers and they are studying the mystic path.

I was entranced. It was like coming to a place I had dreamed about, a true home. And surprisingly right then, on that first day, Shah Jii looked at me closely and asked if I wanted “to learn something.” I knew he was not talking about their customs. He was asking me if I wanted to enter their world and participate in their spiritual path. I had been there for ten minutes. I didn’t know this person. He seemed wildly powerful and charismatic but completely strange and unknown. I had no idea what “learning something” might involve. This was at the far edge of anything I would have imagined a few minutes earlier. Surely one would need to consider this invitation very carefully. And then I said, “Yes.”

At that moment my life in Pakistan changed dramatically. I accepted Shah Jii’s offer because of my ethnographic orientations—it looked like an amazingly interesting cultural world—and even more because of my dissatisfaction with the way my life was going. No doubt Shah Jii, intuitive as he was, sensed this. From then on I spent much of my time with the Sufis at the mountain shrine or traveling with them to the old city of Rawalpindi or to the shrines of other saints. Some of the time I acted as an ethnographer, observing what was going on and asking questions, but I also became a student of Shah Jii.

One of the Sufi practices I learned was “the mirror of consciousness,” a particular way of attending to inner experience. In dominant American culture, almost no attention is paid to the stream of consciousness, the flow of imagery and language that runs through our minds when we are not engaged in demanding tasks, focused rational thought or engrossing social interactions. Commonly this half-conscious mental activity is labeled “daydreaming” and dismissed and disdained as trivial and unimportant. Most of us are vaguely aware that we daydream a lot, but few pay attention to what it is like. So it is illuminating to hold a mirror up to your consciousness, to stop yourself at routine moments of the day and ask yourself, “What was I just thinking or daydreaming about?” With a little practice you can learn to

recall what you were just imagining and trace the flow back through the chains of association that connect one scenario with the next. The stream usually consists of a curious mix of spontaneous memories of the past, anticipations of the future and fantasies of desire and fear, mingled together with interior conversations. These subjective experiences are often compelling. Remembering a scene from the past is almost like whatever was going on then is happening again in our minds. Without any volition we imaginatively reconstruct scenes from the past and populate them with images of the people who were there. Doubles of our friends, family members, lovers and acquaintances appear as vivid presences. Commonly they interact with us, speaking to us as they did before. Anticipations and fantasies have a similar quality, as we are teleported into movie-like scenarios of the future where, again, images of people we know or conjure up interact with us. The mirror of consciousness helps us see how engaging these imaginary interactions can be. But in the U.S. most of us receive no encouragement to observe such inner experiences or to consider their possible importance.

The Sufis took a very different approach. Attending to the inner life was considered an important aspect of pursuing the spiritual path (*tariqat*). The *Murshid* was to guide the student along this path, which was understood to consist of a variety of stages that were dependent on the particular nature, character and needs of the student. Always this guidance included assisting the disciple in clearing away the false worldly ego aspect of his or her psychological makeup (*nafs*), the selfish, vain, petty, grasping, impatient, unkind, judgmental aspects of one’s being. Clearing some of this away allowed the student to realize his or her true self (*ruh*), understood as the divine, true center of one’s being. Various forms of “practice” (*riyaaat*) were assigned, depending on the *Murshid*’s sense of what the student needed at a particular stage of the spiritual journey. Some teachings were directly presented in words. As Shah Jii once said to me and a few other disciples, “Never think yourself above or below another person.” This kind of suggestion was to be taken in, recalled and acted on to help avoid judging others or indulging in feelings of being lesser than others. The student was also expected to pay attention to how the *Murshid* behaved in different kinds of situations—like the calm, amused, easy going, style Shah Jii expressed on our trip to Kashmir—and use this as a guide. The assignment to beg for a month in the city might be given to a disciple who needed to work on humility; the assignment to wear heavy chains might be given to one who was inclined to impatience. All disciples were also given prayer and meditation assignments to clear and focus the mind, sometimes at home and sometimes in a cave in the mountains or at a pool of water by a stream. These might involve concentration on the breath, on the flame of a candle or on sacred words like *khaaduz* (peace).

The mirror of consciousness is facilitated by meditation. Holding your focus on a sacred word, your breath or a prayer is difficult precisely because it is easy to lapse into daydream-



ing. Practicing meditation helps you become more sensitive to your inner life. Since meditation also helps you establish your being in the true self, it gives you a psychological position from which to observe the stream of consciousness. “You must practice with the mirror of consciousness,” Shah Jii said, “to overcome your desires, consciousness and anger from inside you.” In your semi-conscious daydreaming, false ego feelings and imaginings can be observed and cleared away.

Paying attention to the flow of our inner life was also considered important because some of what takes place here is spiritually valuable. Calming ordinary consciousness and using the mirror to see what comes to mind helps us listen for those subtle interior experiences the Sufis called “indications” and “inclinations,” intuitive, creative guidance in how to deal with a problem or a call to a particular action. One disciple told the following story:

Before I was planning to go back [home], I had a strange dream or vision in which I saw a graveyard, a forest and a mountain shrine. I could not understand the meaning though I thought about it almost continually. On the day of my departure, I went to the bus stand to get a ticket. As I put my foot up on the step, I was suddenly seized by a strong inclination to visit Saint Buri. So instead of going home, I took the bus to Rawalpindi. The next day I went to the Saint’s tomb in Nurpur. I spent about a month there and became very pleased and content. One day I came up here to visit and as I climbed up the trail and saw this shrine, it brought my dream back before my eyes. For this was the shrine I had been shown in my dream!

It is important to be meditatively alert to your inner life so as

not to miss the spiritual guidance that appears here.

Indications might also involve vivid memories of the *Murshid’s* past teachings. These were thought to be much more than random memories. They were considered a mystical re-experiencing and reinforcement of the teachings you had been given. This practice also involved more advanced possibilities. As Shah Jii put it, “You must develop an image of your teacher in your heart. And then he will be present everywhere and whenever he is needed for help.” Facing a difficult situation, you could breathe, relax and call up the image of the teacher in one’s mind. You could ask, “Shah Jii, how should I deal with this?” and the image of the teacher might offer an answer. Cultivated for a while, it seems that the image is actually providing an independent suggestion or answer. The Sufis believed that as the disciple developed further along the path, the *Murshid* could literally speak to the student at a distance wherever he or she might be and even provide tangible help. A disciple of Shah Jii’s was doing a meditative practice in a pool of water at the edge of a river far from the shrine where Shah Jii was staying. Somehow the disciple was caught in the current and swept down the river. But because of their mystical connection, Shah Jii was able to pull him safely out of the water.

A *Murshid’s* power to perform such actions was believed to come from his own relationship with spiritual adepts who might no longer be living in this world. It is a fundamental belief in this Sufi world that the spirits of saints who have died, perhaps many years ago, are still actively present and influential in everyday life. This is why followers make pilgrimages to the tombs of a saint, especially at the

anniversary of his or her death (*urs*) when the saint's spirit may be particularly inclined to grant assistance. Shah Jii described his own relationships with several deceased spiritual adepts including his own *Murshid*, Saint Buri Imam, and the mysterious wandering saint, Zinda Walyi.

Zinda Walyi has no tomb, only resting places. All Pakistani Muslims know of *Kawaka Khizer*, the invisible saint and master of water. Zinda Walyi is like this. He is still alive and he helps people. Wandering always, he has spiritual power (*batni taqat*); he is ever alive, eternally alive. He is not (usually) visible to people, but he can communicate with us. He has the power of magical flying (*taqa-i parwaz*); he can reach Sufis anywhere, wherever he wants. A young man was brought up here to the shrine recently. He was acting crazy from possession by *jinns* (evil spirits). He was very strong and uncontrollable, and when he was here, the *jinns* started drawing him closer and closer to the fire to burn him. But by concentrating, calling on the power of Zinda Walyi, I was able to jerk him away, pull him back and release him from the *jinns*. When a saint is needed, followers can call for his help. When this has been successful, they may offer thanks by calling out the saint's name. When the Sufis felt that Buri Imam had helped them through some difficulty, they might shout out: "Burrriiiiiiii!"

There are several reasons to consider the mirror of consciousness. First, to achieve a better cultural and historical understanding of what Sufis involved in the so called "Cult of the Saints," are really about requires attention to this neglected but central aspect of their practices.² It also calls our attention to the fact that the stream of consciousness is not just a psychological phenomenon, as we tend to think; it is also profoundly cultural. Culturally constituted values, desires, anxieties, assumptions, and forms of language dominate our inner life. Because of contemporary American beliefs that emphasize external accomplishment and rational thought, we ignore this experience, and most studies of culture completely overlook both the content of the stream of consciousness and the cultural ways people understand and interpret it. We can see that the Sufis are right to think that a society's worldly values don't just exist out there in society or in a people's belief system. They pervade the inner life of the individuals who make up a given society. Contemporary Western cultural criticism is concerned with addressing the false values that afflict human societies such as sexism, homophobia, racism, ageism, and materialism, but we will likely never fully understand how these affect human beings unless we, like these Sufis, address the inner life where these false values affect consciousness.

The Sufi practice also has some interesting implications for those of us involved in contemporary Sufism and other spiritual and philosophical traditions such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Zen. Curiously, like the dominant culture, most of these traditions pay little attention to the stream of consciousness. In meditation we are usually taught to concentrate on the breath, an image or some other point of focus

and not to allow our consciousness to drift away into daydreaming. Everyone who meditates knows how easily this can happen. Similarly when one gets up from meditation, the usual emphasis is on practicing "mindfulness," being attentively present to what is going on now, rather than to lapse into daydreaming. The Sufis I knew in Pakistan agreed with this orientation as it applied to holding one's concentration in prayer or meditation. But as I have tried to show, they also believed that paying close attention to the flow of their inner life was useful in observing and clearing away activities of the false self, which interfere with the spiritual journey.

Ignoring or suppressing the stream of consciousness would also mean one was missing spiritually significant understandings and subtle forms of creative inspiration. In our society, some literary and artistic traditions recognize and value the creative intuition that can take place here. The poet and novelist Wendell Berry speaks of imagination as a "way of knowing things not otherwise knowable," the site of creativity which artists and writers tap into.³ But it is not just artists and writers who benefit from this ability. All human beings have this capacity. In trying to understand how to live our lives, it is important to attend to guidance found in our own inner life. Whether we personify it as coming from a saint or *Murshid* as the Sufis do, seeing it as gift from a Hindu goddess like *Saraswati*, taking it as coming from "The Muse," or our own "unconscious," the creative power of the stream of consciousness is a valuable source of help. Like the Sufis, we should not only attend to this source of inspiration carefully; like them we should be more properly grateful for its often profoundly important help.

As our car approached the checkpoint on the road to Kashmir, my anxiety mounted. Given their crosscutting religious and political allegiances, I knew that some Pakistani policemen, soldiers and officials favored Sufis and would be inclined to help us. But others would be hostile and go out of their way to give us a difficult time. "What will happen," I wondered, "when they stop the car and ask for the travel papers? Will the indications Shah Jii received really get us through this checkpoint safely?" The uniformed guards held their rifles ready as we slowly approached the barrier. And then suddenly the guards turned back and quickly raised the gate, saluting smartly and waving as we passed through. We did not even come to a stop. As the checkpoint faded away in the distance, the Sufis smiled and chuckled. Clearly, those indications from the saint had brought us safely through this difficulty. They looked at each other and then, together, loudly called out, "BURRRRIIIIII!"

NOTES

1 While I made contact with the Sufis again on a brief return visit to Pakistan in 2007, what is described here is based on my experiences and field notes during 1976-77.

2 Henry Corbin provides an historical perspective in his *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn Arabi*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press (1969).

3 Wendell Berry, *Imagination In Place*. (Berkeley, Counterpoint 2010).

