WHAT IS AN "INCLUSIVE SUFI ORDER OR SPIRITUAL PATH"?

by Moineddin Jablonski

On one hand, an inclusive Sufi order is one that does not require its members to belong to a particular religion, or to any religion, as a precondition for admission. On the other hand, an inclusive Sufi order respects all religions, including pagan, native and shamanic traditions, and its members often belong to one or more of them. In contrast, there are a number of traditional Sufi orders which insist that its members belong to the Islamic religion as a precondition for mureedship (initiatic training).

Hazrat Inayat Khan, the Pir (Sufi teacher) who brought the Sufi Message to the West from India in 1910, called Sufism a "Message of Spiritual Liberty," a Message of "Unity, not uniformity." "The true religion to the Sufi," he said, "is the sea of truth, and all different faiths are as its waves." He added, "Sufism has never had a first exponent or a historical origin. It existed from the beginning, because human beings have always possessed the light which is their second nature. And light in its higher aspect may be called the knowledge of God, the divine wisdom -- in fact, Sufism. Sufism has always been practiced, and its messengers have been people of the heart."

An inclusive spiritual path is one whose adherents practice a "live and let live" ethic in relation to their fellow human beings in matters of religion and spirituality. Like Sufis, persons treading an inclusive spiritual path will respect all religions and spiritual traditions as having a divine origin. Normally, such persons will be linked with a spiritual teacher from whom they receive practices and direction, and to whom they are accountable for their personal and spiritual growth.

Examples of inclusive spiritual paths are universal forms of Zen, Vipassana and Vajrayana in Buddhism, Vedanta and Tantra in Hinduism, and schools of universal realization in Taoism, Judaism and Christianity. Students of these and other inclusive spiritual paths will practice a deep-felt toleration for all forms of truth-seeking, since spiritual experience reveals the same divine essence in the heart of all beings. However, some spiritual seekers are of the "natural type" described by Inayat Khan. These persons take Nature itself as their primary teacher, and may not be formally linked in a teacher-disciple relationship. Sometimes this can be problematic, because there is no one to whom they go to have their personal and spiritual growth reality-checked, nor are they accountable to anyone in matters of personal behavior and self-control. In such cases, a community representative must take on the role of advisor and reality-check, and if the seeker wishes to belong to the community he or she must be willing to accept this kind of appropriate oversight.

Mature seekers of the natural type often prove to be invaluable builders of land-based spiritual community, due to their rapport with the rhythms and cycles of the Earth, kinship with plant and animal life, practical hands-on approach to getting things done, and general willingness to accept responsibility in a group setting. Ideally, all members of the Southwest Sufi Community will possess a heartfelt attunement to Nature, because stewardship of the Bear Creek land will be a spiritual practice in itself, a way to increase life, virtue and unity-consciousness in the world.

As we prepare to come together for this experience in wholistic living, remember that we are living in a time of rapid change and intensive growth -- a process which brings out the worst and best in each one of us. Everywhere people are challenged to stick to their ideals in a world of fearful emotions which too often lead to abusive words and violent acts, even in our own homes. Our work is to root out these imbalances in ourselves, so that our hearts can become havens of safety, peace and refuge for each other. Practicing thus, we develop individual spiritual capacities which, when transposed to the level of intentional community, create greater potential for harmlessness, compassion and loving-kindness to arise planet-wide.

These are some of the things that spring to mind in considering the meaning and importance of inclusive Sufi orders and spiritual paths in our lives.