

Sufi Treatments Methods and Philosophy Behind It

Sehnaz KIYMAZ*

* History and Critique of Biology, Ph.D

Summary

Sufism is a mystic approach to Islam which has the aim to be united with the Beloved, Allah. Sufi's believe, like most Muslims, that illness comes from Allah and Allah is the one who can ail it. There are 6 stages that our souls can be in. All these stages have their own emotional and physical illnesses. Breath is an important factor in healing and also in ascending the stages of soul. The breath of a sheikh would be full of baraka (Allah's blessing). Sufis believe that there should be a balance and harmony in their lives. They separate foods into four groups: hot, cold, dry and moist. And they use the opposite food group to cure an illness in the other group. Abstinence is a mandatory practice in Islam and it helps the body to rest and heal. Another type of treatment is with oils and they are mostly applied onto the body. As we see Sufi medicine mostly depends on one's faith to Allah and to a balanced life.

Key Words: Sufi Treatments, Islamic Medicine, Philosophy

Starting towards the end of the 20th century and continuing in our present century we are witnessing the rise of mystic religions in the Western world, especially in USAⁱ. Although the reasons behind this rise are complex and worth to be researched on, this paper will focus on another aspect of one of these mystic religions.

Sufism is a more mystic approach to Islam. It is usually cited for the beautiful poetry and teachings of many of its shaykhs and dervishes like Mewlana Jelaluddin Rumi or more contemporarily Bawa Muhaiyaddean. However, as people are trying to heal their souls by these teachings and poetry, they also try to use what may be called Sufi medicine as a way to heal their bodies. Many foundations say that they can cure illnesses, especially the so-called incurable ones such as AIDS through this alternative method like the Barzakh Foundationⁱⁱ.

The proceeding paper will give some examples of Sufi medicine and will try to cite some of the huge amount of philosophy and faith behind this alternative medical approach.

What is Sufism

Sufism, mainly called *tasawwuf* in Islamic world, is a mystic approach to Islam. While Islamic Orthodoxy emphasizes the outward, public living of Islam, Sufism suggests its followers to turn within themselves and live Islam within their soulsⁱⁱⁱ.

Sufis use the circle as a symbol to explain how they connect their practices to Islam. They see the Islamic Law (*Shari'a*) as the circumference of the circle, enclosing and ruling everything on this Earth. They believe the Ultimate Truth (*Haqiqa*), Allah (one of the names of God in Islam), is the center point of this circle. They consider their way to reach Allah, which is their *tariqa* (meaning the path), is the radius that connects the circle with the central point. As there are infinite number of radii from the circumference of circle to the center of the circle, there are infinite number of *tariqas* (paths) that can lead to the ultimate truth. Another way Sufis explain this relationship is by using the analogue of a tree. They consider the roots of the tree as *Shari'a*, the trunk as the *tariqa* and the fruit as the *Haqiqa*.

Sufis try to free themselves from all earthly feelings, purify their souls. They try to get rid of their ego and reach to the *Haqiqa* that they carry inside. When one of the great sufis, Rabia, was invited to the garden by one of her friends with the words "Come out and behold what God has made", she replied by saying "Come in and behold the Maker", meaning that she felt totally in unison with her God, inside her self^{iv}. All sufis try to reach a higher level of perception in which they become united with their God.

Sufism is mostly rejected by the Islamic Orthodoxy because of several reasons. The most obvious reason

is that all tariqas have a sheikh, a spiritual leader who leads his/her disciples in their path leading to union with God. The disciple has to be totally obedient to his/her sheikh which places the sheikh in a higher level than the disciple. However, Islamic Orthodoxy say that every person is equal in front of God and no one can come between God and God's beings. Sufis claim that the sheikh is only a guide for the disciples to find their path to God, not somebody who comes between God and God's beings.

What is Illness in Sufism?

Allah did not create any illness without creating the remedy, except death (old age) Allah said that he who lives according to the Quran will have a long life.

Hz. Mohammed^v

According to Islamic thought (not only Sufi thought), illnesses come from God (Allah) like everything else. Therefore, Sufis believe that the treatment will also come from Allah and the curer (most of the time the *Pir*) is just a person who mediates between Allah and the patient^{vi}. It is believed that the *Pirs* (the sheikh) are in a higher position and they are considered to have *baraka* (Allah's blessing) on them. "The saint (the *Pir*) is able to create an open channel between God and the world, and *baraka* is what flows through this channel. By coming in contact with a saint, whether living or dead, the follower himself comes closer to God."^{vii} This blessing is the assumed cure of every illness. However, as we will see later, physical treatments are also used such as different foods and diets.

Sufis believe that the illnesses are results of imbalances or a break of harmony within the body or the mind^{viii}. For example, if the regular harmony of the pulse and the circulation gets disturbed, one part of the body gets less blood so disease occur in that part of the body. When the mind, the harmony of the thoughts, gets disturbed emotional problems such as doubt, suspicion, distress and despair occur^{ix}. More elaborated version of this is the imbalance of the moisture and temperature in the body which can be cured (brought to the right balance) by a diet consisting of the opposite moisture and temperature to the ones that cause problems in the body. For example, if

a person has too much blood, which is considered to be warm and moist, the person should have a diet consisting of dry and cold foods such as brown rice or beans^x.

The ideas of mental and physical illness are not usually separated from one another in Sufi thought. Likewise, the distinction between the causes and treatments of emotional imbalances cannot be strictly categorized into physical or psychological causes or treatments^{xi}. For example, according to the great Islam philosopher and scientist Ibn Sina (Avicenna) the anger we feel without any reason can be attributed the excessive moisture around one's heart^{xii}. The treatment is to balance this moisture with a diet that consists of dry foods (examples from all types of foods will be given later)^{xiii}. This treatment method is, most probably, the biggest difference between Western and Sufi medicine.

The Stages of the Soul

The Sufis believe that the soul can evolve within its life time approximately like the belief of Western science that organisms can evolve through time. However, this Sufi evolution is more similar to Lamarckian evolution than Darwinian evolution in that this progress has to be within one's life time.

There are 6 stages (*maqam*, Arabic, singular) a soul can be in. *Maqam an-nafs* (the stage of ego), *maqam al-qalp* (the stage of the heart), *maqam ar-ruh* (the stage of the soul), *maqam as-sir* (the stage of the divine secrets), *maqam ar-qulb* (the stage of nearness), *maqam el-wisal* (the stage of union) are the 6 stages^{xiv}.

The first and the lowest stage is the stage of ego. The people at this stage act only according to the desires and pleasures of their body and soul. The motional disturbances of this stage include fearfulness, anxiety, self-doubt, selfishness, insanity, weeping for no reason, depression, paranoia, sexual perversions, and suicide. If a person stays too much in this stage, physical problems such as drug abuse, alcoholism, criminal behavior, obesity, hypoglycemia, blindness, jaundice, heart attack, venereal disease and cancer occur. These conditions are the results of failing to exercise proper control over the *naf's* (ego's) functions or appetites^{xv}.

The next stage is the stage of the heart which can be attained by controlling and disciplining the appetites of the ego. People in this stage show a basic goodness to themselves and the others. Although this is a higher stage people in this stage of the soul are still prone to illnesses both of the body and the emotions. The emotional disturbances of this stage include the inability to concentrate, fear of failure, certain types of hypocrisy, excessive emotions such as severe ecstasy, depression, joy and severe anger, arrogance, forgetfulness, and being inconsiderate of other's feelings. The physical problems of this stage are of cleansing nature, mostly chronic and acute, unlike the degenerative illnesses of the previous stage. The diseases of the station of the heart include headache (especially migraine), nausea, diarrhea, general toxicity (skin eruptions, scalp problems), aches and pains throughout the body, irritability, fever, gallbladder and kidney problems. As you see, these diseases, themselves are ways to treat and heal the body; they are trying to throw off the toxicity and the superfluous matter in the body which are the remains of the stage of ego^{xvi}.

The third stage is the stage of the soul. However, as Moinuddin & Chishti warns us, "It is very hard to achieve the higher stages without the help of a shakh"^{xvii}. To reach this stage, one needs to develop the capacities of compassion, mercy, consideration, and self discipline to a higher perfection. At this stage one should be able to see illnesses as coming from God and these problems should only deepen the faith of the follower rather than make him/her question and blame God. The emotional disturbances that can be faced in this stage are a frivolous, irreverent attitude to life, sometimes the habit of degrading the others, arrogance, pride, self deception, lack of concentration and giddiness. The physical problems of this stage include auto-intoxication, various kinds of nervous tremors, fatigue, corrupted appetite and fever. However, to make the point more clear we should state that this fever is the kind of fever that heals one from the toxic material in his/her body, as Hz. Mohammed says "the kind that makes the sins fall of like leaves from the trees" because it gets rid of toxic material with the aid of the high body temperature and sweating^{xviii}.

The fourth stage is the stage of the divine secrets. Rising to this stage should be aided by regular breathing exercises in the supervision of a shaykh. Otherwise,

a sense of difficulty in breathing and sometimes a sense of suffocating occur. The other physical disease of this stage is fever, the type of fever that was mentioned above. It is mostly observed in this stage that people are disturbed by "events of the nonmanifest realms"^{xix}. The further one travels through the stages of the soul, the more one is tested for his/her belief and faith in God. The bothering of the nonmanifest realms are actually signs of this testing. If a person does not reach this stage with proper training it is easy for the person to loose the faith in God just because of these bothering.

Next stage is the stage of nearness or what may be called the stage of neighborhood. The people in this stage enjoy the neighborhood of the highest heaven. They may be considered to have another world that they live in. However, they should be able to live both in this world and in the one closer to the heaven. The physical illnesses in this stage are very limited. However, one of the emotional problems is severe ecstasy. This results in loosing all interest or connections to this world. This is not a desired thing because Hz. Mohammed told his followers to "Work for the other world as you will die tomorrow and work for this world as though you will never die". The testing still continues in this stage, more intensely^{xx}.

The last stage is called the maqam el-wisal. This is the stage of union, union with God, but it cannot be achieved through one's own effort. The decision for one's rise to this stage is given by God. This is the highest stage which all Sufis long to reach. Being in union with the Greatest, there are no physical or emotional ailments left in this stage. People who reach this stage can see death as a continuum of their lives though in a different form. Therefore, it is believed that these people have the knowledge of the exact date of their deaths and face it with happiness because they will reach their most Beloved, Allah, when they die^{xxi}.

The Importance and the Healing Power of Breath

And remember when thy Lord said unto the angels:

Lo! I am creating a mortal out of potter's clay of black mud altered.

So, When I have made him and have breathed into him of My spirit...

Quran 15:28-29^{xxii}

It is believed that there are five elements that form the human body: air, earth, water, fire and ether. Air is the voice or the breath that reaches the ether, the depths of human body^{xxiii}.

It is from this belief that the Sufis find the healing power of their prayers. They believe that every vowel in the Arabic alphabet, *a, I, u*, direct breath to different parts of the body. Therefore, each prayer and *sura* (different chapters) of the Quran helps to heal different illnesses, depending on the sounds it contains^{xxiv}. This is a healing method one can perform to treat oneself.

As told above, the shaykhs are most of the time the doctors of the local area they live in. The shaykhs that are especially trained in healing are called *hakim*'s. These shaykhs use the *baraka* (the blessing of Allah) they have upon them to treat patients. One of the healing methods is called *dam* (breath) in Arabic. The shaykh utters verses from the Quran and blows the breath that carries the blessing of the God because of the shayk's *baraka* and the power of the prayers upon the patient. This way the blessing and the positive effect of prayer gets transferred to the sick person. A similar way is to have the shaykh blow his breath, again full of *baraka* and prayers, onto a vial of water. Then, the patient drinks or uses the water in the form the shaykh advises. The biggest advantage of this method is that the water can be brought back to a patient who cannot get up from his/her bed^{xxv}.

Amulets are big parts of Sufi healing methods. They contain verses from the Quran, written in different shapes or on different materials. The shaykh also breaths on these amulets to pass his *baraka* onto them^{xxvi}. A method of preparing amulets consists of assigning numbers to each letter in the Arabic alphabet. The shaykh writes an amulet (*tawidh*) to the ill person which forms the numbers of a name of God, the name of the patient and the name of one more important thing in the patient's life, to personalize the amulet^{xxvii}. Then, the patient needs to put that amulet to a specific place or he/she needs to wear it on a particular part of his/her body or the ink can be washed off from the amulet and that water can be drunk^{xxviii}.

The most important aspect in all of these methods is the faith in God. The patient should have faith at

least in the shaykh, if not in Allah, and the shaykh has to have full faith in Allah. They should be aware that the healer is Allah and only Allah and the shaykh is only a mean of mediation between the patient and Allah^{xxix}.

As mentioned in the previous section, breathing is also a way to ascend to the higher stages of the soul. By doing regular breathing exercises, by reading Quran in the supervision of a shaykh and learning how to pronounce the Quranic verses effectively, one disciplines his breath and puts it to a harmony which will allow that person to live a healthy life. If a person tries to do these breathing exercises by him/herself, he/she will most likely take wrong steps and experience difficulties in breathing and a feeling of suffocation. Therefore, the role of the shaykh is very important at this practice.

Healing with Herbs and Food

The stomach is the home of disease and abstinence the head of every remedy. So make this your custom.

Hz. Mohammed^{xxx}

Digestion is one of the essential functions of human health. Sufis prefer to call digestion as cooking. The reason is that Sufis believe that the processing of food within the digestive tract is more similar to cooking than Western medicine assumes^{xxxi}.

Sufis believe that there are four essences of the body. These are Blood which is hot and moist, Phlegm which is cold and moist, Bilious which is hot and dry, and Atrabilious which is cold and dry. Any problem within one of these essences should be treated according to the moisture and temperature characteristic of the essences. Moinuddin & Chishti argues nearly all of the Eastern medicine techniques uses this idea of four essences of the body while Western medicine totally disregards it^{xxxii}.

Hz. Soleyman was the first person to learn the healing effects of the foods. The legend states that the herbs appeared one by one and told their healing powers to Soleyman^{xxxiii}. From that point on, human beings learned the secrets of herbs through the teachings of others.

To facilitate foods to treat diseases that affect any of these essences, the Sufis separate foods into eight

categories. Four of these categories are for hot foods while the other four is for cold foods. The four, hot categories are distinguished by their degree of hotness and the same is true for the four cold categories^{xxxiv}. Some examples of hot foods are lamb, liver, eggs, sesame, pistachio, corn oil, coffee, honey, onion, red lentils, all sweet things...etc. Examples to cold foods include beef, mother's milk, butter, pear, fig, sunflower oil, green teas, bitter and sour things...etc. To have a healthy body one must have a diet consisting of a balanced amount of both hot and dry foods^{xxxv}.

So, how can a person make use of these foods to treat the diseases? For example, if a person has a problem in their Phlegm essences which is the essence of the secreted mucus like having excessive mucus in the body, the person should eat hot and dry foods such as almond, kidney beans and red pepper to balance the excessive cold and moist Phlegm in the body. This way people can cure the illnesses in their body by the help of foods.

However, there is one practice in Islam which is mandatory to every Muslim in good health which is fasting. Fasting is abstaining oneself from either specific foods or all foods and drinks for a particular amount of time. This practice is done in order to earn the favor of Allah, to discipline the body and the ego in their excessive desires, and to cleanse the body off of its toxic matter^{xxxvi}. The mandatory fasting is performed during the 30 days long month of Ramadan of the lunar calendar. During this month, Muslim people abstain eating, drinking, sexual pleasures from sunset to sundown^{xxxvii}. The eating habits are inherited from the habits of Hz. Mohammed. Even his hadiths show his approach to eating: "Less food, less sin"^{xxxviii}. Therefore, most shaykhs advice their followers to eat as small amount as possible that would allow them to sustain their body functions. Allah allowed people to fast outside of Ramadan to earn His favor. However, it is forbidden to fast during the first two days of the Eids (religious holidays).

God, also, allows pregnant and nursing women, children under the age of 12 and people of old age not to fast. The pregnant and nursing women has to make up for the days they missed some other time, while the people of old age can give money equivalent to a

day's meal at their house to a poor person for each day they do not fast^{xxxix}.

Even for healthy, young people, abstaining oneself from so many things, especially drinks for such a long period of time seems like a harm to the body. However, during this month, the whole body takes a rest from activities that normally tire it like overeating and sexual intercourse. Also, all the activities that are abstained during the day can be done during the night^{xl}. However, the harmony and balance that should be present in all of a Sufi's movements should also be present in the activities that he/she performs at night. If a person goes without eating and drinking all through the day, but eat whatever he/she can find at night, that will also cause many illnesses and fail to produce the results fasting is supposed to produce. Therefore, the idea of eating only as much that is needed to sustain the body functions is a good strategy.

Another Method for Treatment with Herbs: Oils

There are three things of this world that I have been made to prefer: prayer, women, and scents.

Hz. Mohammed^{xli}

Oils are liquids that are extracted from certain flowers, spices or plants. All of them have a particular smell which can be used to treat diseases.

Rose is the most valued smell in the Islamic world. The rose petals are regarded as amulets when shaykhs read Quran verses on them. Sufi Abu Anees Muhammad Barkat Ali makes remedies from rose petals. He collects rose petals from a nearby garden which is showered with prayers and blessing. He takes the petals to a room full of 250000 copies of Quran, as well as the one of the four oldest Qurans in existence. The petals are put on a cloth and are arranged in such a way that spells the name of God (Allah). Various verses are recited over them to make them mature enough for healing. Then they either use the petals or the oil extracted from these petals to heal sick people^{xlii}. The oil of rose petals simultaneously work on purifying and uplifting the physical, emotional and spiritual bodies^{xliii}.

It is said that Hz. Mohammed liked the smell of musk among all the scents. Musk is not actually a

herbal oil. It is derived from the sexual glands of a special type of deer. It is said to be greatly effective in healing heart and sexual problems^{xliv}.

There are many other scents that are useful for other purposes. For example, oil of amber (liquid amber) is very effective in healing because of the very ancient healing energy it contains due to its storage for ages under the soil^{xlv}. Sandalwood is used as a base to extract other oils from their herbs, and it is also used in most of the meditation and spiritual practices because of its power to quiet the egotism of the body, especially the sexual energies^{xlvi}. Other scents are present to heal other diseases, but these four are the most widely known and used ones.

The most frequently used application of the oils among the Sufi world is to rub a small amount of the oil onto the outer part of the right hand. The oil remaining on the hand should then be rubbed over the chin, across the front of the shirt, and onto the wrists^{xlvii}. The scent that evaporates from it and the infusion of the oil into the skin have the healing power.

Another method is to put one or two drops of the oil onto a pea sized cotton and then to place that cotton into "the ridge like ledge of the ear, just above the ear opening"^{xlviii}. At that point of the ear, five nerves form a ganglia and thus the oils can heal especially nervous, mental and emotional diseases^{xlix}.

Conclusion

As you see, Sufis find the causes and the remedies of illnesses in different areas of life than Western medicine. While the Western medicine purely depends on scientific proof, experimentation and drugs, Sufi medicine most heavily depends on faith, then to breath and natural healers such as herbs.

To a person who is accustomed to the Western methods of healing, Sufi methods seem absurd and sometimes even dangerous (e.g. fasting). However, when you go deep into the philosophy of the practices and exercise these to the full extant, it is seen that these practices prove to be beneficial to people.

It should again be noted that all these treatment methods depend on the faith the patient has towards his/her treater (a shaykh or a *hakim*) and his/her curer (Allah). Sufis would think that no positive results can

be obtained from a treatment if either the patient or the shaykh lacks the faith.

This paper tries to present a very small amount of treatment methods and philosophy that is present in the Sufi world. It is impossible to cover the whole variety of treatments in length with a paper of this size. Also, unfortunately, the amount of resources on the topic is very, limited. However, it may be interpreted that as the interest in alternative medicine increases more and more in the Western world, more and more research will be done on the subject.

COMMENTS and ENDNOTES

- i Omid Safi
- ii Barzakh Foundation page
- iii Eickelman, 2001
- iv Vitray-Meyerovitch, 1989
- v Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 54
- vi O'Riordan, pg. 3
- vii Ewing
- viii Hazrat Inayat Khan, pg. 199
- ix Hazrat Inayat Khan, pg. 200
- x Moinuddin & Chishti, pp. 26 & 48
- xi Hazrat Inayat Khan, pg. 199
- xii There are still many debates over Ibn Sina being a Sufi or not. For further information see Morewedge
- xiii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 13
- xiv Moinuddin & Chishti, pp. 26-34
- xv Moinuddin & Chishti, pp. 27-28
- xvi Moinuddin & Chishti, pp.28-29
- xvii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg.29
- xviii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 30
- xix Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 31
- xx Moinuddin & Chishti, pp. 31-32
- xxi Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 34
- xxii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 123
- xxiii Hazrat Inayat Khan, pg. 211
- xxiv Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 132
- xxv Ewing, 110
- xxvi Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 134
- xxvii Ewing, pg. 110
- xxviii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 135
- xxix O'Riordan, pg. 3
- xxx Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 54
- xxxi Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 43
- xxxii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 44

xxxiii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 111
xxxiv Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 47
xxxv Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 48
xxxvi Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 85
xxxvii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 85
xxxviii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 55
xxxix Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 85
xl Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 85
xli Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 54
xlii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 114
xliii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 117
xliv Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 117
xlv Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 115
xlvi Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 117
xlvii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 119
xlviii Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 119
xlix Moinuddin & Chishti, pg. 119

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