

Sufism and Yoga

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“Take the best, leave the rest”

Sufi saying

Introduction

As a practitioner and student of yoga and as a member of an Indian Sufi order, I have noticed lots similarities and affinities among the various techniques that were used in these two paths to reach the promised goals in the past times.

In this research I want to briefly list Sufi techniques – in particular, how and why they were used - outlining shared elements and substantial differences between the Sufi and yogic paths. It is also my intention to outline the nature of the Indian Sufism - Yoga relationship and their possible interactions or technical borrowings.

At the end I would like to refer to a contemporary Indian Sufi order - the Gudri Shah order (Ajmer) by analysing purposes and practices in the present spiritual path.

A limitation for my research is constituted by the fact that the interest in this topic is very recent and related academic studies are still in a developing process due to the abundance of documents only available in their original languages (Sanskrit, Urdu or vernacular), nevertheless I think it is interesting to give a glimpse of the dialogue between Sufism and Yoga to view how common techniques have historically been used in different religious contexts with different final purposes. Another factor of interest is the investigation on if and how the use of these techniques has changed over time both in Yoga and Sufi context.

Sufism and Yoga

Muslim conquest of India mainly took place between the thirteenth and seventeenth centuries, although contacts between Islam and the Indian subcontinent can be traced back to the eighth century. The cultural exchanges between Islam and Indian cultures took place over one thousand years and it is in itself a complex phenomenon to explore. The presence of Sufism can be traced back since the eighth century and has been instrumental in spreading and increasing the reach of Islam throughout South Asia. Sufi mystical traditions became more visible during the Delhi Sultanate and after it their presence spread in the rest of India.

Sufism is considered to be the innermost and esoteric face of Islam and it “taught a kind of noetic knowledge based on personal experience, inward illumination and mystical intuition”¹. As Titus Burckhardt said, “Whereas the usual path of believers aims at attaining a state of bliss after death, accessible by virtue of an indirect and, as it were, symbolic participation, by means of prescribed works, in divine truths, Sufism has its end in itself, since it offers the possibility of access to the immediate knowledge of the eternal; this knowledge, being one with its object, frees from the fatal concatenation of individual existences...”²

Sufism is a soteriological path that begins with the purification and refinement of the ego, which cannot be killed but like a mirror can be made polished to reflect the qualities of the perfect human being, the Prophet Muhammad. Through this perfection, the Sufi reaches that spiritual knowledge who leads to Fanā, that is the forgetfulness of his self and the remembering or the contemplation of God only.

The body is the mean to reach this refinement and the place where this spiritual knowledge takes place and each Sufi order teaches different techniques to achieve the goal, some are in common between all the orders, others are specific. I summarize them below:

Common techniques

Initiation

For anyone wishing to enter the Sufi path, initiation plays an essential role. Initiation is a covenant between the disciple and the master according to a procedure inspired by the model of the Prophet and his disciples at Ḥudaybiyya³ and is conferred through the contact between the hands of the master and those of the disciple. Initiation links, through the master, the disciple to the Prophet from whom the spiritual power descends and the role of the master is essential, as Bayazid Bistami said “who has no master, he has Satan as his master”.

Concentration

Different techniques (body positions, breath regulation, visualizations) are employed to fix the mind on one point to control the changing streams of thought. It is precisely these, in fact, that foster the dispersion of the disciple in the phenomenal multiplicity and hinder his view on the inner reality.

¹ Kugle (2007, 4)

² My translation from Burckhardt (1979, 13): “Mentre la via usuale dei credenti mira ad ottenere uno stato di beatitudine dopo la morte, accessibile in virtù di una partecipazione indiretta e per così dire simbolica, per mezzo delle opere prescritte, alle verità divine, il sufismo ha il proprio fine in se stesso, poichè offre la possibilità di accedere alla conoscenza immediata dell’eterno; questa conoscenza, essendo tutt’uno con il suo oggetto, libera dalla concatenazione fatale delle esistenze individuali...”

³ This episode is remembered in the Qur’an, 48:10 “Indeed, those who pledge allegiance to you, [O Muhammad] they are actually pledging allegiance to Allah. The hand of Allah is over their hands. So he who breaks his word only breaks it to the detriment of himself. And he who fulfils that which he has promised Allah, He will give him a great reward.”

Dhikr

Dhikr literally means “remembrance” and it consists in the repetition of one of the divine names or of more structured formulas containing it, as in the Qur’an is said “And keep yourself patient by being with those who call upon their Lord in the morning and the evening, seeking His countenance. And let not your eyes pass beyond them, desiring adornments of the worldly life, and do not obey one whose heart we have made heedless of Our remembrance and who follows his desire and whose affair is ever in neglect.”⁴ and again “O you who have believed, remember Allah with much remembrance”⁵. It is given by the Master and it must be recited following a precise rhythm. Generally the disciple starts to recite it loudly, then whispered and lastly it became silently (in yoga the recitation of mantras follows the same developments: *vācika japa*, loudly; *upāṃśu japa*, whispered and *mānas japa*, silent and mental repetition). Its efficacy is grown by the breath control.

Breath control

Breath discipline is necessary both to aid concentration and to recite the dhikr correctly⁶. First of all, the irregularities and discontinuities of habitual breathing must be corrected, than, in analogy with the techniques of *prāṇāyāma*, the practice of holding the breath is introduced. The suspension of the breath is sometimes associated with practices quite similar to the yogic *bandhas*⁷ and the need to sit in a position that keeps the spine straight when practicing breathing exercises and concentration is emphasized: the seated pose suggested as most suitable is similar to what yoga calls *vajrāsana*, but the sitting position with crossed legs is also recommended.

The repetition of dhikr, together with the techniques of breath control, are the main tools of the Sufi’s practice. These techniques gradually become more sophisticated and are applied and directed in specific body places called *latā’if* (singular *latīfa*). *Latā’if* are meant as potential psycho-spiritual organs or capacities that can be realized as progressive stages in those undergoing spiritual development or potential receptors of divine energy (as intended, for example, by Sirhindi). Depending on the Sufi order, they can be different in number and their place in the body may differ. In the Naqshbandi order, for example, the *latā’if* are six and are arranged in a triangle shape, with the *latā’if* called *Qalb* (heart) and *Rūh* (spirit) below the left and right breasts respectively, *Sirr* (the secret) and *Khafi* (the hidden) above the left and right breasts respectively, but closest to the breastbone and the last, *Akhafā* (the more hidden) in the middle of the chest; Muhammad Gīsūdīrāz, who belonged to a Chishti order, exhibited a five *latā’if* model and Gul Hasan described the technique of a

⁴ Qur’an 18, 28

⁵ Qur’an, 33, 41

⁶ “The Sufi is the one whose breath is counted” Shayk Nasir al Din Chiragh (1274 – 1337)

⁷ For example, the practice can involve contracting the abdomen to make the breath rise and hold in the chest or at the top of the head, or the breath can be pushed down, saturating the abdomen. See Kugle, 2012 (p.45)

qalandarī silent dhikr performed with breath retention that starts from a latīfa located at the level of the navel and then goes up to the top of the head and from there back to the navel⁸.

The most relevant discussions on the doctrine of dhikr and latā'if in Muslim mystical literature date back to the Mogul era. These arguments were originally transmitted orally by master to disciple and were codified in written form only later.

Techniques specific to some orders

Samā

Samā means “listening” and it initially refers to listening to the chanted recitation of the Quran which developed according to precise phonetic and musical rules. Afterwards verses and entire poetic compositions were inserted into the Quran recitation and they were progressively accompanied by music. Listening to the samā awakens the memory of emotional and even ecstatic states that are persistent from the eternity in a latent form in the listener. The samā awakes the memory of the original ecstasy that would have occurred in pre-eternity, during the primordial covenant in which the spirits had testified to divine uniqueness before their coming into existence⁹: it is the memory of a kind of bliss similar to the yogic ānanda.

Ascetic practices

In some Sufi orders more extreme techniques were adopted to discipline the ego, as the ritual of Chilla. Chilla literally means “forty” and it is a spiritual practice of solitude and penance where the Sufi sits in a cave or in a secluded place, without food for forty days and nights in imitation of the Arba'een, a religious observance that occurs forty days after the day of Ashura in memory of the martyrdom of Al-Husayn ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet. The aim of this practice is to clean the mind of the unnecessary thoughts and achieve extreme concentration, focused on a single object, without any distraction.

Alā al Din Alī Sābir, from whom derived the Sabiri Sufi order, a branch of Chishti order, used to practice the salāt-i ma'qūsī, the inverted prayer. It consisted of a spiritual retreat for praying by hanging by one's feet in a dry well. Though this practice was never made obligatory for his followers, it was integral to his own personal practice as he believed that, through these forced bodily practices, one could dissipate his selfishness: “with them he unleashed an inner spiritual heat and force that could either propel or singe others, depending upon the sincerity of their approach toward him”¹⁰.

⁸ Speziale (2007, 145)

⁹ De Zorzi (2021, 79)

¹⁰ Kugle (2007, 239)

Use of intoxicants

Drug use is specific to Qalandar Sufis. This group includes wandering ascetics belonging to different sects, who are unorganized and cannot be traced to a specific order. They wear iron rings around their necks and on their arms, do not consider austerity and seclusion important, and are lax in following the mandatory precepts and practices of Islam. Refraining from practicing corporate worship, they usually feed on charity, own nothing but a few personal possessions, and do not marry. Qalandars adopt eccentric behaviors not as a simple celebration of libertinism, but rather as an antinomian practice of affirming negative action and it seems spontaneous to compare them with the tantric yogīs who followed the left hand path (*vāmamārga*), although I have found no studies indicating a direct influence.

Devotion

Indian Sufism, while being an esoteric path based on initiation, ascetic and meditative practices accessible to an elite of disciples, also became a form of popular religiosity, and *khānqāhs*, the structures that housed Sufi brotherhoods, were visited by ordinary people, attracted by the spiritual powers of the master, for worldly reasons of protection, health and good fortune. The master was seen as an intermediary interceding before God for the benefit of the devotee even after his death; his grave often becomes a place of worship and pilgrimage. Thus developed a popular devotional cult that included pilgrimage to the saint's tomb, offerings of food, incense or flowers, and that mingled and merged with the more sophisticated and esoteric expressions of devotion to God expressed by the Sufis in poetic compositions, rich in sensual and erotic metaphors with which they celebrated the oneness of God and their love for him.

According to Burchett, Sufism “played enormous roles in the emergence and overall development of the bhakti tradition”¹¹ in north India: “the primary idiom of Sufi religiosity, the primary Sufi conception of God, and the primary Sufi motive in religious life can all be boiled down to a single word: love”¹². The concept of love “unites” Sufis to Bhakta Vaiṣṇava movements distinguishing both of them from the tantric movements of the Nāth yogīs, which were focused on the acquisition of powers to become the embody God.

More than one yoga practitioner or scholar will be familiar to these references, and indeed the question of yoga's influence on Sufism has been raised since the earliest studies on Islamic mysticism. Islam was seen as a legalistic and intolerant religion, and early Orientalists thought that the mystical tendencies of Sufism must have an external origin. Although scholars today agree that Sufism is a phenomenon that originated within the Islamic religion, some argue that the breathing and meditation techniques and some ascetic practices derive from Hindu or Buddhist yogic techniques, however “little proof is ever offered for this thesis”¹³.

¹¹ Burchett (2019, 82)

¹² Burchett (2019, 81)

¹³ Ernst (2016, 149)

As I have already mentioned, Sufism played an important role in the spread of Islam in India. To understand its role and its links to yoga, it is necessary to trace historically the early years of the Sultanate period. The role of Turkish-Iranian penetration in India was primarily cultural and political: "Sultanate rule brought about a number of significant shift, particularly with regard to the institutional structures that had long upheld the Indian socio-political order"¹⁴. These institutional structures were represented by the tantric temples and monasteries that had long served to authorize and express the regal power in India. The power and influence of the major tantric orders, linked to temples and monasteries dependent on royal patronage, declined, their monasteries and temples were destroyed or occupied and used by the Sultanate authorities and were gradually replaced in their political and social functions by Sufi khānqāhs. "While the institutional, mainstream religiopolitical tradition of Tantra was largely destroyed in North India, less-institutionalized communities of tantric ascetics, in particular those commonly known as the Nāth yogis came to flourish"¹⁵. Nāth yogīs and Sufis shared many aspects: both were interested in asceticism and psychophysical techniques, both assumed the existence of subtle physiology, which they used as a basis in meditation; for both, meditations were conducted with the aid of visualization, breathing techniques, and with the help of recited formulas. Nāth yogis practiced burial and both were very liberal about caste restrictions or brahmanical precepts. Interactions between Sufis and yogīs, particularly Nāths, are witnessed in the hagiographies of the Sufi saints, where the victories of Sufis over yogīs due to their superior spiritual powers and the conversion of the latter to Islam are recounted. The textual evidence is not numerous and is later, but this area of studies, i.e., the interaction between Sufism and yogīs, is still little explored and many texts are written in vernacular languages and not yet studied. In the following I'm going to examine some of these texts.

Bahr al-Hayāt

One of the first and most important texts testifying to the Sufis' interest in yoga techniques is "The Ocean of Life" (*Bahr al-Hayāt*), the Persian translation of the Arabic version of a Sanskrit haṭha yoga text called *Amrtakunda*, now lost. This text was translated in 1602 from the Arabic version by a Sufi master of the Shattari order, Muhammad Ghawth Gwaliyari and it is the first known illustrated yoga book. Ghawth did not had access to the original Sanskrit text and the chapter on yoga postures is greatly expanded from the Arabic version, he had probably consulted with contemporary yoga teachers and the āsanās are increased from five to twenty-one. Other yoga techniques are described in the text, such as khecarī mudrā, the practice of plugging the ears to listen to the inner sound of the eternal, and sītālī. Ghawth freely associates yogic techniques with Sufi techniques for example "in the seventh chapter of the Arabic text, which treat the magical imagination (*wahm*), the seven Sanskrit mantras or chants associated with the seven cakras or spinal nerve centers are all

¹⁴ Burchett (2019, 68)

¹⁵ Burchett (2019, 78)

boldly declared to be translations of the Arabic invocations of the names of God”¹⁶. Discussing on the breathing techniques, he associated the yogic terms *hans* and *so ham* pronounced during the exhalation and inhalation respectively with the islamic expression *rabb ruhi* (spiritual [breath as] Lord) and the second with *rabb al-arbab* (the Lord of Lords) and moreover the archetypal yogi Gorakh is assimilated to the immortal prophet Khizr, and Matsyendranāth with the prophet Jonah. Ernst speculates that Ghawth had used the original Arabic text “as a teaching text with his disciples in the Shattari Sufi order and that his Persian translation emerged as an oral commentary on the Arabic”¹⁷. Ghawth frequently emphasizes the fact that on a practical level the experience of yogis and Sufis is very similar and that doctrinal differences, although they exist, are relatively unimportant when compared with the spiritual realizations for which yoga can be an effective tool. The spread of his text was extremely wide, reaching the whole of North Africa and Indonesia: as Ernst pointed out, there is a progressive Islamization of the text in subsequent translations and “the popularization of this text has been achieved primarily by adding Islamic terms, names, and even whole chunks of texts to make the text more accessible”¹⁸ that is, increasingly integrating the text into the theoretical framework of Islamic Sufism. This text is an early and clear testimony to the Sufis' interest in and knowledge of yogic techniques (although the question of the definition of yoga itself raises some critical issues) and testifies to how these techniques were being integrated into Sufi practice.

Risala-I Wujudiyya

Another extremely interesting text for reconstructing the interactions between Sufism and yoga is the “Treatise on the Human Body” (*Risala-I Wujudiyya*)¹⁹. This treatise, in another manuscript copy, is also known as “Treatise on the Nature of Yoga” (*Risala-I Sarmaya-i-jog*) and it is attributed to the founder of the Chishti order, Mu'in al-Din Chishti. All of the manuscripts of this text are late, dated no earlier than the 17th century, and the attribution to Mu'in al-Din Chishti is fictitious but significant because it reveals the seriousness with which Indian Sufis approached the practices described considering them important enough to be part of the teaching of the great Sufi master. The text is divided into three short chapters: the first chapter describes the subtle physiology of the body, focusing on the three channels that run parallel along the spine and describes a sophisticated system of breath control by relating it to a complex cosmology that which assume the idea of the human body as a microcosm related to the universal macrocosm; the second chapter is the most “Islamized” with frequent quotations from the Qur'an, while the third describes the metaphysical levels of Islamic cosmology and the Archangels related to them, relating them to the breath of yogic practice, and in the “Treatise on the Nature of Yoga” these are accompanied by what appear to be Sanskrit mantras, which are

¹⁶ Ernst (2016, 154)

¹⁷ Ernst (2016, 152)

¹⁸ Ernst (2016, 218)

¹⁹ Wujūd means “existence” but has an archaic meaning of “body”. See Ernst (2016, 306)

not easily intelligible due to the inability of the Persian script to represent short vowels. The text is obscure and not easy to understand and “demand more explanation than the text provides, which presumably would be available from oral commentary by a master”²⁰. This text “offers perhaps the early mention of two key concepts of the Chishti Sufi meditation tradition: the “Praised Station” (*maqam mahmud*) and the “Helping Authority” (*sultan nasir*)”²¹. These two terms are derived from the Qur'an to describe two psycho-spiritual states that are achieved in meditation and we will find them later in a later text "The Alms Bowl" (*Kashkul*) by Shaykh Kalimullah Shahjehanabadi, who had initiation in the Chishti order: here, he describes the technique precisely, explaining how the Praised Station is reached by staring at the tip of the nose while sitting on heels or on all fours, while the Station of Authority is reached in the same position but by gaze-shifting into the space between the eyebrows. Scott Kugle²² suggests an evocative parallel between this text and the contemporary yogic text *Śiva Saṃhitā*, pointing out how the two have several elements in common: both reflect on the nature of God and the human body and how the body can be employed to achieve union with the divine; both assume a monistic worldview, where there is a single divine principle and where the multiplicity of appearance is only an illusion that must be dispelled by contemplation. This topic is not then explored in depth by Kugle, but I bring it up because I think it is very interesting and deserves study.

Yoga Kalandar

The “Yoga Kalandar” is a text written in Bengali whose origin is uncertain. Although a text of the same name written in the fourteen century is reported to exist, no copies survived and it is likely that the text is a medieval written transposition of previously orally transmitted teachings. According to Bhattacharya, the text was written by a Muslim Sufi who practiced and knew the techniques of yoga²³ and the attribution of the techniques described to Kalandar Sufi is interesting and significant. The term Kalandar (unshaven) in literary sources contemporary to "Yoga Kalandar" does not necessarily refer to a member of the Sufi order of Qalandariyya but indicates more generally a person of the lower classes who becomes a mendicant dervish and who is not necessarily Muslim but may belong to the Hindu or Buddhist religion. In the text, the Islamic analogy between the human microcosm and macrocosm finds a theoretical correspondence in the Tantric view of the body as a reflection of the cosmos. As a result, they merged and the Cakra system was incorporated in the attempt to formulate coherent ritual frameworks for attainment of spiritual states. Central to “Yoga Kalandar” is yogic control of posture and breath. There are four postures described, mainly seated, and the goal of postural practice is primarily to facilitate body stability for breathing techniques and meditative work. Breathing techniques involved the three Nadīs and the aim is the control of the breath in some places of the

²⁰ Ernst (2016, 307)

²¹ Kugle (2012, 175)

²² Kugle (2012, 175)

²³ Bhattacharya (2003, 69)

body: Bhattacharya notes that the word used for “control” in the text is “*sambaraṇ*” and cites as its equivalent the yogic term Kumbhaka, retention²⁴. This text represents a bold example of absorbing and integrating elements of Tantric yoga into the Islamic Sufi praxis: “Bengali Sufis transform the technologies of body-centered *sādhana* into means of *tawḥīd*, the egoless absorption into pure awareness of the presence of God”²⁵. However, assimilation and integration is limited to the technical aspects of Tantra and “Islam does not share in a substratum of common assumption such as belief in karma and rebirth and has radically different soteriological conceptions. Moreover, Islam comes to its assimilation of Tantra already in the possession of a developed esoteric tradition”²⁶

The dialogue and interaction between Sufis and yogis, however, did not occur in a unidirectional way, and it was not only Sufis who integrated elements clearly derived from yoga into their practice. In order to understand the dynamics that occurred between these two traditions, I want to briefly mention two texts that belong to the Nāth tradition: *Gorakhbānī* and *Mohammad Bodh*

Gorakhbānī

This text is a collection of vernacular poetry attributed to Gorakhnāth, the mythical founder of the Nāth order dating from the thirteenth to the seventeenth century. The text emphasizes in several passages the superiority of Nāth yogis who are “neither Hindu nor Muslim, but different and superior, closer to the ultimate truth than the two other creeds are vainly looking for”²⁷. In other passages they recognize the figure of Mohammad and the truthfulness and eternity of his message and it seems clear that they didn’t identify themselves as Hindus nor they considered Mohammad as a guide only for Muslims.

Mohammad Bodh

“The Secret of Śrī Nāth” (*Śrī Nāth Rahasya*) is a compendium of mantras to be recited during specific rituals. This text is recent (2005) and the author, Yogī Vilasnāt, does not indicate sources, but the text includes many archaisms and is probably compiled from fragments of older texts. It has a passage entitled “Wisdom of Mohammad” (Mohammad Bodh) that gives us precise directions on what is to be recited and how during the month of Ramadan: the yogi must take fast from the sunrise to the sunset and he has to recite the “Wisdom of Mohammad” each day at a specific times for a certain number of times. By doing so, when the month of Ramadan is over, he will have recited the text seven hundred eighty six times, a number that corresponds to

²⁴ Bhattacharya (2003, 75)

²⁵ Hatley (2007, 367)

²⁶ Hatley (2007, 367)

²⁷ Bouillier (2015, 4)

the numerical value of the *Basmala*, the formula "in the name of Allah" that open the Qur'an. The opening text reads "Ādeś to the True Name, Salutation to the Guru. Om Guruji! Allāh bismillā. Ram is Rahim. Om is Mohammad", mixing yogic elements with Islamic elements. In the text then a distinction is made between Muslims and Hindus who follow outward religious rules and the fakīr, the Nāths who are intoxicated of God (a characteristic expression for Sufis), and do not follow merely formal religion: they are the only ones who pursue the True and can be either Hindu or Muslim. The same "The Secret of Śrī Nāth" gives the list of twelve branches of Nāth yogis and adds other groups as some Muslim Yogīs practicing magic and tantra-mantra and they are also quoted in censuses in the early twenty century. Another group of Muslim yogis is the Bhartrhari: they are musicians and singers: "they take then the garb of yogis (ochre cloths, fire-tongs, begging bag) except the ear-rings which they don't wear, and go wandering according to a precise and regular spatio-temporal cycle which takes them to Muslim shrines as well as Hindu temples"²⁸, singing the epics of the Nāth tradition. However they are Muslims and they follow the Islamic law and the Muslim festivals.

The Gudri Shah Order: a contemporary case

I would like to refer to a contemporary Indian Sufi order and to briefly describe the practices and techniques employed nowadays. The Gudri Shah Order was founded by Hazrat Syed Malik Mohammed Alam (1788 – 19007) who spent sixty years of his life wandering barefoot in the jungles of India, Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq and Arabia. He reached Ajmer to visit the shrine of Mu'in al-Din Chishti at the suggestion of his master, Pir Mustafa of Baghdad and here he was completely enraptured by the Saint and obtained by him his Spiritual Initiation²⁹. He spent the rest of his life living nearby the tomb of the Mu'in al-Din Chishti, wearing a long jute coat and a patched (Gudri) shawl across his shoulders. The spiritual chain currently links this order to the four major Indian Sufi orders, Chishti, Qadiri, Suhrawardi and Naqshbandiyya and the spectrum of techniques known in the Gudri Shah Sufi order is derived from the traditional techniques of these orders mentioned above, but not all techniques are taught today. As Hazrat Mohammad Khadim Hasan Shah, the third master of the Gudri Shah Order, said "Unless the ego turns away from distractions of the world, it cannot turn toward God"³⁰ and today's human being, who is deeply distracted by the world, must practice preliminary techniques to start the path. These practices can be extremely disparate and are taught by the master to each disciple according to his or her nature: the master may ask the disciple to offer some of the food to the Saints of the order remembering the initiatory chain that connects them to the Prophet, or to light a candle at a particular time of day or to feed the wild animals or birds. These are small gestures that allow the disciple to pause and detach his attention from daily life and its distractions. Only when the disciple has learned to detach from worldly thoughts can he engage in the actual techniques, and one is the remembrance of God's name, the recitation of the Dhikr. The

²⁸ Bouillier (2015, 14)

²⁹ In Sufism initiation can also be conferred by a Master who is no longer alive by virtue of his power.

³⁰ Hasan (2006, 2)

Dhikr is recited first loudly and then silently, and the use of special breathing techniques is almost never recommended. The best Dhikr among the Sufis is the name of Allah and the visualization of the name "Allah" in the night time, with the eyes open is a recommended technique to control the self. About visualization techniques, they are interesting the indications on how to improve the visualization of the master: one must visualize spiritual guide in the same way an artist makes a painting. First imagine the basic shape, then make the outlines and finally give a complete shape to the image, then add details to the surroundings, decorate the image and then draw it into the heart: this technique is similar to the tantric visualizations. Meditation is an advanced technique: "The seeker of the truth, when he becomes coloured with the light of remembrance (dhikr) of Allah is then instructed by his spiritual guide and teacher to take o *muraqabat* (meditation). *Muraqabat* means and implies that there is no other idea in the mind, except the one meditated upon. No rival thought should confuse, puzzle, disturb or distract the one undergoing meditation"³¹. One can meditate on different things, concepts, phrases of the Qur'an but the journey of meditation starts from self-inquiry because "he who knows himself knows his Lord"³² and ends when "wherever you might turn, there is the Face of Allah"³³.

Nowadays, Sufi path seems not to be generally "walked" as in the past. Modern living conditions, busy schedules and daily rhythms make it difficult to devote oneself totally to the spiritual quest. Many people enter an order in search of balance or driven by practical interests, and the techniques taught are adapted to the times and nature and demands of the disciples. Indian Sufism, too, thus seems destined to change and move away in its outward form from its origins to adapt to the times as yoga did during the centuries and I think it would be interesting to see the parallels with the evolution of yoga.

Conclusions

The relationship between cultural traditions is a complex factor which concerns the paths of identity and the self-representative functions of peoples, involving many spheres (sociology, pedagogy, philosophy, religions). These cannot be easily reduced to simple schemes and often find its deeper meanings in marginal or not so obvious aspects. As Burchett has pointed out, the Turkish Ottoman invasions of the Indian subcontinent gave rise first and foremost to a meeting (and clash) of cultures of which religion was only one aspect and initially the religion of the Turks for the Indians was but another form of worship of the Supreme Being and not a significant distinguishing factor. As I have already mentioned, Sufism played an important role in the spread of Islam in India and Sufis, often belonging to cultural elites, were far from the formalism of Islamic religious orthodoxy: their worldview, their understanding of the nature of and relationship between human beings,

³¹ Hasan (1999, 44)

³² This saying is sometimes incorrectly ascribed to the Prophet, but it is was more likely a statement of one of the early Muslim tradition.

³³ Qu'ran 2, 115

their view of the nature of God and the world find many elements in common with the existent Indian cultures and Sufis were open to all, without discrimination of creed or caste. The spread of Sufism in India occurred almost simultaneously with the rise and the consolidation of Nāths tantric currents, and there are evidences of interaction between these two groups. Both involved a soteriological path, reserved for an elite group of disciples, which required a form of initiation, presupposed a subtle physiology of the human body, and utilized a series of psychophysical techniques of meditation, both were regarded by ordinary people as wonder-workers, healers, and possessors of holiness : “The similarity between jogis and Sufis extended to the point that the heads of Nath jogis establishments became known by the Persian term *pir*, the common designation for a Sufi master”³⁴. Perhaps these similarities made a dialogue between these two paths possible and fruitful, and there is no doubt about the interest shown by Sufis in the sophisticated techniques of haṭha yoga. These techniques, however, were integrated and incorporated into an already existing, extensively developed and refined independent soteriological system, rather than somehow acting as a “source” for the Sufi tradition and the “Sufi interest in haṭha yoga was very practical and did not (with certain notable exceptions) engage with philosophical text of Vedanta or other Sanskrit schools of thought”³⁵. Moreover, the path of the Sufis differed profoundly in its aims from the one of the Nāths: the role of love for God and the practice of devotion, the desire of “fading away” in the memory of the Beloved are traits that rather bring Sufism closer to the bhakta Vaiṣṇava movements.

The dialogue and influence between Nāths and the Sufis was mutual, there is interesting evidence for the Nāth yogīs' integration of some Islamic doctrinal elements and of the existence of Muslim yogis. I like to look at the relationship between Sufism and yoga as one looks at the interaction between two living creatures who have common traits and distinctive traits that make them unique and who are capable of dialogue and in that dialogue mutate, grow, change. As Ernst pointed out, it is difficult to talk about Sufism and one should rather talk about Sufisms, because “There is no Sufism in general. All that we describe as Sufism is firmly rooted in particular local context”³⁶ at the same time it is difficult to talk about yoga, because the term has a complex history and indicates very different things. Sufism and yoga were both about the human being and both offered, in and through the body, a way to tend to the transcendent beyond the ordinary condition of existence. I believe these common or similar characteristics to be the ones making the way for a real dialogue possible, interesting and fruitful.

³⁴ Ernst (2016, 274)

³⁵ Ernst (2016, 271)

³⁶ Ernst (2016, 271)

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