

# **Coming to One through the Many**

## **The Shared Wisdom of the Sufi and Yogic Traditions**

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### **An Ancient Connection**

Sufism is the mystical tradition within Islam. Yoga is the mystical tradition within Hinduism. Both have as their goal union with the Divine, or realization of the ultimate reality. In the west, the word “Yoga” is often used to refer to physical asanas but the meaning of the word is union. For millennia, Yogis have lived in seclusion practicing advanced techniques of meditation with the goal of realizing union with the Divine source of all. Similarly, Sufi saints have developed spiritual techniques to awaken awareness of union with the ultimate Beloved.

Today Sufism and the spiritual discipline of Yoga have universal application. They are both practiced all over the world although India remains the source of the deepest yogic knowledge. For centuries Sufi saints and Yogis have lived side by side on the Indian subcontinent. The Kashmir region in particular has been known as a center for Sufis and Yogis from the Shaivite tradition. There has been a sharing of wisdom, knowledge and experience and a recognition that both traditions lead to the same goal. Many great masters in the region have had followings among both the Islamic and Hindu communities. The Indian saint Kabir is one of the best known examples. A more recent example is Shirdi Sai Baba. Both tapped the essence of Islam and Hinduism, leaving aside doctrine and ritual for the deepest truth hidden within the traditions.

With the spread of religious fundamentalism in recent times, the mystical traditions have retreated or been quieted in some places, but the presence and wisdom of the Yogis and Sufis is greatly needed now. A broader sharing of their

knowledge will help humankind evolve beyond narrow, limiting identities to a more universal worldview. Our survival depends on this.

Humankind is at a critical moment in its evolutionary history. Walls between communities, between ethnic and religious groups are breaking down in many places. A global community is emerging. While this has led to fear and reaction in some quarters, hardening religious divisions, most people welcome the opportunity to know, understand and feel connected to the “other.” The awareness of interconnection, interdependence and universal human values is becoming more common.

While history is filled with religious division and battles over which religion has exclusive hold on truth, the future will focus on shared wisdom. Sufism and the spiritual practice of Yoga, universal in their nature, have much to offer. They can help the human community evolve a more inclusive worldview.

### **The Reality of Oneness**

Out of the One comes the Many. All of creation, all that is, emerges from a single source. This is known to the Sufis and Yogis alike. It is possible through spiritual disciplines and practices to pierce the veils of appearance that cloud the knowing of this Oneness, that make the Divine appear inaccessible. But what is also needed is love, the response to the call for union. Both the Sufis and Yogis speak of this experience, of union with the Beloved. Both express a longing, an ardor, an urgent desire or need for this union – a passion for the Divine.

In both traditions, there are saints who point the way, men and women who have experienced some aspects of this union, who have glimpses of the Divine. Both are living traditions, going beyond book knowledge, although for both, the knowledge is captured in their sacred texts – the Koran and the Hadith, the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita. But most importantly, living saints attest to the

possibility of knowing the Divine in every age. The path is here and now, and there are no arbiters in between. The saints of both traditions seek to inspire in the devotees the yearning for this experience. Know the One, they said. Know Oneness.

### **The Many Paths**

Infinite is the Divine and infinite are the ways to reach the Supreme Goal. Sufism and Yoga are universal in that they recognize the multiplicity of paths, knowing that each individual has his or her own route to the Divine, of equal validity with all others.

Both traditions acknowledge the saints and sages who have come through the ages in different cultures and religions, all pointing the way, a way, to pierce the veils that make the One appear as many.

Yet while acknowledging the truth of all religions, there is also a recognition of the specific contribution of each. The goal is not to do away with or deny the rich diversity intrinsic to the creative power, but rather to celebrate this diversity, know its complementariness, and penetrate the hidden truth within.

This knowledge is particularly important at this historical moment as religions must move away from seeking to convert and expand and evolve toward a more complementary mode of being. Balance between the universal and specific identities will define the next era.

### **The Knowing**

Institutional religion is based on organizing society to live according to moral law and ethical standards. This has served humanity. In the past, mystics were few and often hidden. They made themselves known to the right people at the right time. Increasingly though people are seeking personal experience. Book knowledge is not enough. Thus the popularity of meditation and other forms of contemplative

practice. During the past 50-60 years, meditative techniques and mystical knowledge that had been hidden, reserved for the few deeply seeking souls who abandoned the world, has come into the public domain. People want direct experience of the Divine. The Sufis and Yogis give firsthand accounts of this experience, and this is what brings the shift from the limited to the universal - -the expansion beyond the small "I", the movement from self interest to concern for the whole, the understanding of interconnection, of Oneness, and the ability to tap the love out of which creation emerges so that upliftment can occur. This is the transformation that will guide evolution forward.

How do we bring this knowledge down from the mountains, from the caves and retreat places into the daily lives of aspiring humanity?

This dialogue will be a sharing of experiences between a small group of Sufis and Yogis, drawing in particular from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan (and the US). Our hope is that their coming together will send ripples through the region, revealing a spiritual harmony between the lineages that can manifest itself in all aspects of the political, social and economic life of the region.