

“The Daily Life of a Saint, Ahmad Sirhindi [d. 1624], by Badr al-Din Sirhindi”
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One of the most prominent features of Islam in South Asia is the Sufi tradition, especially as embodied in the major Sufi orders. Among these, the Naqshbandi order is distinctive for its rigorous practices and well known for its charismatic leaders. Originating in Central Asia, the Naqshbandi lineage had a history of strong involvement in politics. In terms of Sufi practice, the Naqshbandis were known for insisting on the silent recollection (*dhikr*) of the names of God and for a resolute avoidance of music.

Of all the leaders of the Naqshbandi order, one of the most important was Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi (1574-1624), whose metaphysical and mystical teachings are preserved in his large collection of letters, the *Maktubat*. Sirhindi became controversial for certain claims that he made regarding his spiritual status, which according to some came close to disrespect for the Prophet Muhammad. The emperor Jahangir briefly imprisoned him, and his letters were proscribed by Aurangzeb. Nevertheless, his followers regarded him as the "renewer of the second millennium," and granted him near-messianic status as he reasserted the centrality of Islamic law and ritual

practice in the lives of Muslims. In recent times, Sirhindi has been viewed as a reformer whose ideas prefigure modern notions of religious identity, such as the formation of Pakistan as Islamic state; these interpretations considerably exaggerate the importance of a few political remarks by Sirhindi (such as his antipathy for Shi'is and for non-Muslims), which were rather peripheral to his central religious concerns.

The passage translated here is taken from a contemporary hagiography dedicated to Sirhindi and his successors, composed and completed around 1643 by Sirhindi's disciple Badr al-Din Sirhindi. It comprises the fifth section of the book, on the spiritual practices of Sirhindi. It is preceded by sections on his mystical genealogy, predictions of his advent, and his unique characteristics, and it is followed by chapters defending him against his critics, recording his sayings and his miracles, and offering short accounts of his descendants and successors.

The emphasis throughout this selection is on Sirhindi as the epitome and embodiment of the authentic practice of the example (*sunna*) of the Prophet Muhammad in every possible detail. His daily routine is nothing less than an exhaustive account of the performance of the five obligatory ritual prayers of Islam, along with the supererogatory ("extra credit") prayers that were so commonly observed in Sufi circles. Minute details are provided about his behavior with respect to ritual ablutions before prayer, sleep, eating, the toilet, etc., extending to such details as the toothbrush (*miswak*) recommended in pious Muslim practice as an emulation of a habit of the Prophet. The Qur'an is present throughout, frequently recited during ritual prayer, and continually invoked in additional meditations. Sirhindi acts as imam and leads his followers in ritual prayer. He also is presented as rejecting certain customary practices that he views as incompatible with the strict teachings of the Hanafi school of law, which was dominant in Central Asia and South Asia. This rhetorical insistence on Sirhindi as the defining figure of

correct Islamic practice was also integral to the later Naqshbandi defense of Sirhindi against his critics.

Sufi practices are invoked throughout this hagiographical portrait, although in an unobtrusive fashion. Sirhindi is depicted as leading a circle of recollection (*dhikr*), where disciples would chant the names of God or Arabic formulas such as the Muslim profession of faith. Although he is shown as experiencing extraordinary spiritual states, his strength of character is such that he makes no physical display or reaction whatever. He is naturally ascetic, and only indulges in food in order to comply with the example of the Prophet. His recitation of the Qur'an and his performance of prayer are awe-inspiring to his disciples, but he makes no attempt to embellish his recitation of the Qur'an with musical emphasis. He is surrounded by disciples, both novices and adepts, whom he counsels on the basis of his profound mystical insights; he can also act directly on their inner states through his power of concentration (*tawajjuh*), a faculty particularly cultivated by Naqshbandi masters. He is regarded as the personification of correct behavior.

Taken as a whole, this excerpt is a good example of a hagiographical presentation that aims at enhancing the sanctity of its saintly subject in terms of the core ritual practices of Islam.

From Badr al-Din Sirhindi's *Hazarat al-quds* [Sacred Presences]

Midnight purifications.

His practice in both cold and hot weather, both away and at home, was that after midnight he awakened and recited the prescribed invocations of that hour. After that he went to the toilet, first putting his left foot in the toilet area, and after that the right foot, and then reciting the

prescribed prayer of that hour. After he was done with the toilet, he stood on his left foot and then cleaned himself with earth and water according to prophetic custom. Then he performed ablutions, sat facing the direction of prayer, asking someone's assistance in ablutions. With a ewer in the left hand he first poured water on the right hand and then on the left. After that he washed both hands together and the spaces between the fingers from the palm of the hand outward. While rinsing he employed a toothbrush, brushing three times on the right, three times on the left, and three times on the top; if he did more than that, it was to care for the gums, beginning from the upper teeth of the right side, then the lower teeth of the same side, then the upper teeth on the left side, and after that the lower teeth of that side. In every ablution, he employed the toothbrush, and when he was finished, as this writer has witnessed, he placed the toothbrush above his ear, and frequently also entrusted it to the attendant. His companions kept their toothbrushes in a fold of their turbans. He then spat out the rinse water and three times rinsed his mouth and nostrils with fresh water. He slowly poured water on his blessed face with perfect gentleness from the top of his forehead. He gave a slight precedence to passing his right hand over his right cheek before passing the left hand over the left cheek, so that he could begin with the right. When washing his blessed face, he pushed his turban to one side so that part of his head would be exposed, and he washed it from that side. The amount of water that he poured on his blessed face was such that the drops never splashed on his robe or his body. Every time he let all the drops fall from his hand to his face, so that none of it dripped on his robe.

After that he washed the arms up to the elbow three times, each time repeatedly wiping his right hand upward so that not a drop remained, and likewise with the left hand. He poured water on the fingers, and the water for wiping that he took in his right hand he conveyed to the left hand, scattering it far away so the drops would not splash on the ground and reach his robe.

He wiped his whole head from the front to the back, and he wiped the top of the head with the inside of his right-hand fingers, and the sides of the head with the palms of both hands, bringing them from the back to the front. Then with the same water he wiped the inside of the ear with the index finger and the outside with the thumb. Then with the back of the hand he wiped the neck. He repeated the washing of the right and left feet three times, washing the ankle part of the leg, rubbing the hand upward every time so that it nearly became dry. He observed the customary prayers prescribed for the time of performing a full body ablution.

Late night prayers (supererogatory)

After completing ablutions, he also recited customary prayers, but he did not clean the body with a robe after ablutions. Then he put on a fine clean robe, and with a splendid and dignified bearing he headed to ritual prayer. He performed two minimum cycles of ritual prayer, and he did the rest of the late night prayer with lengthy recitations from the Qur'an. Usually he recited two or three portions of the thirty equal portions of the Qur'an. Sometimes he went from midnight to dawn in a single cycle of prayer. When the attendant called, saying that dawn had arrived, he performed a second cycle of ritual prayer in the minimum fashion and said the peace. Most of the time he performed up to twelve cycles of ritual prayer, more or less, according to the needs of the hour. After every double prayer, in submission and humility he became absorbed in meditation, and when he was done, he prayed for forgiveness and performed other prayers and blessings, a hundred times. He meditated until dawn, or else recited the profession of faith, and a little before dawn, in accordance with the traditional example of the Prophet (prayers, blessings, and salutations upon its source), he would go to sleep, thus realizing the saying, "Keep late night vigil between two times of sleep."

Dawn prayer (obligatory)

Before dawn he would awaken and, after performing a new ablution, would follow custom in his house. After that he would stretch out facing the direction of prayer with his right hand propped under the right side of his chin, but later he would stop stretching out. After that, he performed the obligatory dawn prayer in the mosque with a large crowd, at the first light and the last twilight. He himself acted as imam, reciting the Qur'an at length and in detail. After completing ritual prayer, he recited some customary prayers, and then turning to the people, on the left, or the right, lifted up his hands in voluntary prayer.

Morning prayer (supererogatory)

After the voluntary prayer, he drew both hands across his face, and he then sat in the circle of recollection with his companions and performed this internal practice, until the sun rose up a spear's length. Within the circle they sometimes also listened to the Qur'an from one who had memorized it. Then he performed two cycles of the morning prayer with lengthy recitations. Then he performed two minimum cycles of prayer, after which he recited the prayer of seeking guidance and the completion of the customary appointed prayers.

Advising disciples

Then he went into seclusion, and according to the requirements of his spiritual state, was absorbed in recitation of the holy Qur'an, or sometimes the recitation of the profession of faith. Sometimes he summoned his disciples separately, asking each one questions about his spiritual state, and in accordance with that state gave guidance to each. There were many whose hidden

spiritual states he explained, regarding both present and future, and he clarified them in detail. He trained them, and made them aware of the divine names, the spiritual stations, the ecstasies, and the visitations.

Sometimes he summoned his advanced disciples, explained his own chosen secrets and unveiled to them divine knowledge. He ordinarily tried to conceal those secrets with all his heart, but when he was explaining this divine knowledge, it was perceptible that he was encountering and receiving the spiritual state (of those secrets and that divine knowledge). There were many who, when they heard this sublime divine knowledge from his pearl-scattering tongue, in gazing upon him at that very instant themselves experienced that divine knowledge. Most of the time that this revered one spent with his companions and others was in silence. His companions, from their extreme awe and wonder at him, did not even have the power to breathe. His control was at such a level that, in spite of the onslaught and frequency of numerous kinds of enrapturing visitations, no external sign of the rapture of that revered one ever appeared. He was never seen to be agitated, to exclaim, to shout, or to cry out, except on very rare occasions. Occasionally he wiped away a tear or was close to weeping, and sometimes in the midst of explaining divine realities his face became flushed.

Mealtime

To return to the topic of discussion, when the morning became advanced, he performed two cycles of the morning prayer, though at times from necessity he performed four. He then took food, and while eating he could be seen most of the time to be dividing food for the dervishes, his family, the attendants, and guests. During this time he would sometimes pick up a morsel with three fingers, and sometimes reaching to a plate he would put some food in his

mouth and taste it. At that time it was well known that he scarcely needed any food, and he only ate because eating is the prophetic tradition; prophets have not dispensed with that. At the time of eating, his manner of sitting was by the path of the prophetic tradition: sometimes he pulled up both knees, and sometimes he put the right foot on the left foot and the right knee on the left knee. After finishing with food, he recited the customary prayers of that hour, but he did not, according to popular practice, recite the Opening [*fatiha*, the first chapter of the Qur'an] after eating, for that is not in accordance with the prophetic example.

Forenoon prayer (supererogatory) and noon prayer (obligatory)

After eating, for an hour he took a siesta, in accordance with the prophetic example. Then when shadows disappeared at noon, and the muezzin gave the call to prayer, the muezzin's words, "God is most great," and the awakening of that revered saint took place simultaneously. Immediately, with firmness and dispatch, he stood up on the ground; he never varied from this routine. While listening to the call to prayer, he repeated every word, except that during the two invitations ("Come to prayer" and "Come to salvation") he recited the prayer, "There is no might or power save in God." After he was done listening to the call to prayer, he recited a voluntary prayer, and when that was done, he got up, performed ablutions, put on a clean robe, and came to the mosque. First he performed two cycles of ritual prayer in salutation of the mosque, and after that he performed the four prescribed cycles of the forenoon ritual prayer with lengthy recitations from the Qur'an. After that, he performed the four prescribed cycles of ritual prayer set for noontime. Then he recited the standing glorification of God, led prayers as imam, and recited from the Qur'an at length and in detail. After the completion of the required duties, he arose, performing no other prayers except, "God! You are peace, and peace is from you. You have

blessed us, glorious and generous one." He performed the two other prescribed ritual prayers set for that time. Then he performed the four cycles of ritual prayer that are in addition to the prescribed ones, and he recited the invocations that are customary after the obligatory ones. Then he sat down facing the people and had his companions form a circle. One who had memorized the Qur'an recited it, while he with his disciples sat attentively in meditation.

Afternoon prayer (obligatory)

When that was completed, he completed one or two elementary lessons until the time of mid-afternoon arrived. He arose to perform fresh ablutions. After the return of two-thirds of the original shadow, at the beginning of the time of afternoon prayer, he came to the mosque and performed two cycles of the prayer of salutation to the mosque and four cycles of prescribed ritual prayer. Then he led prayer as imam and performed the obligatory afternoon prayer with a large crowd. After that he recited the invocations that are customary after the obligatory ones. Then he sat down facing the people and had his companions form a circle. One who had memorized the Qur'an recited it, and that reverend one and his companions were absorbed in it. During this time, he was internally concentrating on their spiritual states, and he exerted his concentration for their advancement. Sometimes he performed other virtuous actions.

Sunset prayer (obligatory)

After that, he first performed the ritual prayer of sunset. After the obligatory rituals, he performed the two cycles of prescribed ritual prayer set for that time, with neither delay nor haste. Then he recited six cycles of ritual prayer, with three repetitions of the peace, and lengthy readings from the Qur'an. Most of the readings that had been read during the prayer of the

penitents, or mid-morning prayer, i.e., the Event [Qur'an 56], and Sincerity [Qur'an 112], as well as others, were read now also.

Evening prayer (obligatory)

He then came to the mosque for the evening prayer after "the departure of the whitening of the horizon," (which, according to "the greatest imam," Abu Hanifa, is an expression for twilight, and an agreed-upon time). First he recited two cycles of ritual prayer or of salutation of the mosque, and after that he performed four cycles of prescribed ritual prayer. After that he performed four cycles of obligatory ritual prayer in congregation, performing no other prayers except, "God! You are peace," etc. Then he arose and performed two cycles of prescribed ritual prayer set for that time and four additional recommended cycles of ritual prayer. Then he offered special voluntary prayers. After that, he recited Prostration [Qur'an 32], and sometimes in the four cycles of ritual prayer after the obligatory ones, he recited Prostration, the Blessed [Qur'an 67], Unbelievers [Qur'an 109], and Sincerity. Sometimes in the four cycles of ritual prayer he recited all four books that begin with "Say," and in the special voluntary prayers he recited praise of the divine name, Unbelievers, and Sincerity. He then combined the two standing prayers of the Hanafi and Shafi'i schools of law, which the Hanafis combine and consider good. After the special voluntary prayer, he recited the beginning of two cycles of ritual prayer, reciting from Earthquake [Qur'an 99] and Unbelievers. But at the end, he left off the two cycles of ritual prayer, saying that there is disagreement about them. The prostration that is usually observed after the special voluntary prayer was not performed by that revered one, for the legal scholars have agreed that it is objectionable. Sometimes he performed the special voluntary prayer at the beginning of the evening, and sometimes at the end. After the late-night prayer, he repeated it,

for according to the saying of the Prophet (peace be upon him), a single night does not have two special voluntary prayers. After that, at the time of sleeping, having recited books, verses, praises, and prescribed prayers, he stretched himself out in a long arbor, so that he faced the direction of prayer and his right hand was beneath his face. And the righteous sleep of that revered one was completely in the presence of meditation, union, and witnessing the divine beauty.

How wonderful are the degrees of the sleep that is better than wakefulness!

When reciting the Qur'an, during prayer or at other times, he had a way of reciting that you would swear actually conveyed the meaning within each word. On listening to his recitation, it would suddenly become apparent to listeners that the secrets of the Qur'an were pouring forth upon that one who was brought near to the glorious God. Most of the people who had not entered the circle of his disciples said that this revered one recited the Qur'an in such a manner that one would say that the words came forth from his heart. But he never attempted to recite in a musical style. During the long prayers of Ramadan, we saw few listeners who did not succumb to sleep, but when they heard that revered one recite the Qur'an, most of them were standing up, and they were never affected by sleep.

That revered one had disciples, masters of spiritual states, whom he had guided as students in his presence. Before they reached the level of perfection and the capacity to perfect others, he gave them permission to teach the spiritual path, so that by saving people from the whirlpool of error, they could guide them towards God (glory be to Him). But because of their lack of perfection, he repeatedly and emphatically explained to them that they should never imagine themselves to be perfect, for they would fall into consternation and the path of their advancement would be blocked. Of all the paths of the masters, he considered the lofty path of

the Naqshbandis to be the best, for he said that this path is identical with the path of the holy companions of the Prophet, so he held this lineage to be superior to other lineages.

This lowly one [i.e., Badr al-Din Sirhindi], prior to entry into the group of servants of that imam who is the source of concentration, several times went to his mosque, and I saw him performing prayer. Involuntarily I left my place, for I knew that he was talking face to face with the Leader of Creation (i.e., Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him peace), and that he saw that revered Prophet (may God bless him and grant him peace) performing prayer; he himself was performing prayer according to that example. Otherwise, this lowly one has seen religious scholars and masters, but I have never seen this kind of prayer from anyone.

He had perfect morals, humility, compassion for God's creatures, acceptance, and submission. His relatives suffered much from corrupt rulers, but with submission and acceptance he paid them no attention. Whenever an important person came to see him, he arose respectfully and gave a place to the visitor at the head of the assembly, speaking to him according to the man's measure. He never showed respect to infidels even if they were politically powerful and prominent. It was his custom that he was first to greet anyone, and it is not known if anyone ever succeeded in being first to greet him. He exerted himself with extreme compassion in protection of the rights of the people, and whenever the news of someone's death reached him, he took it as a warning and expressed his regret. He said words of consolation and attended funeral prayers, reciting prayers for assistance.

Sources

The selections I have translated here are from the Persian work compiled by Badr al-Din Sirhindi [d. 1648], *Hazarat al-quds [Sacred Presences]*, (Lahore: Mahkama-i Awqaf, 1971), 80-92.

Further Reading

A good biographical study is available in Yohanan Friedmann's *Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal and London: McGill-Queens University Press, 1971).