



REVIEWED IN THIS ISSUE:

The Teachings of Sufism

Selected and translated by Carl Ernst

The Book of Awakening
by Mark Nepo

*Health, Self & Soul:
The Sufi Psychology of
Growth, Balance and Harmony*
by Robert Frager

The Teachings of Sufism

Selected and translated by Carl Ernst
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No scholar has shown a fuller understanding of the dimension of love as the fundamental dynamic of Sufism than Carl Ernst. His work on the great exponent of love-mysticism, Rūzbihān Baqlī Shirāzī (d. 1209 AD), including a general study of this master and his writings and a translation of his autobiography, *The Unveiling of Secrets: Diary of a Sufi Master*, is unparalleled in the field of Sufi study. Now the sensitivity which Ernst has brought to bear in those works, as well as his study of *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* and other such texts, serves as the driving force behind a compendium which he has brought out, embracing the expressions of those Sufi masters through the ages who saw fit to commit their teachings to writing or whose wisdom was such that their words became widely quoted.

This anthology, *The Teachings of Sufism*, brings together the expressions of a truly entrancing collection of saintly figures steeped in Divine love, ranging across the Islamic world to embrace the Arabic-, Persian- and Indic-speaking domains and demonstrating, with its abundant assortment of female guides, the profound true Islam which transcends the anti-feminine bigotry of the narrow fundamentalism that has poisoned the reputation of this most brotherly and sisterly of faiths in recent years.

While it is appropriately Rūzbihān who dominates the collection with three articles planted like a supportive central keystone squarely in the middle, telling us about the relationship between human and Divine love, the ethics of traveling the Sufi path, and the devotional benefits of listening to music, there is a wealth of testimony from writers in regions well beyond the Iran of Rūzbihān's native Shiraz, from North Africa to the Indo-Pakistani Subcontinent, many of whom are little known even in their own regions. From Libya we have Muḥammad as-Sanūsī (d. 1853), from Turkish Anatolia the universally beloved Rūmī (d. 1273), and from Iran, Iraq and India an abundant congregation of devotees.

Ernst lays the groundwork with several fundamental texts stemming from the heyday of instructional writing in Arabic, when the masters in Abbasid Baghdad first felt the need to provide textual material in an age when the sciences, philosophy and doctrinal theology were being made the subject of treatises and expositions. The important figure here is Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d. 988), who traveled from Ṭūs in Iranian Khorasan to Baghdad to join the conclave of authors of doctrinal dissertations and write his seminal *Kitāb al-luma' fī t-taṣawwuf* ('Sparkles in Sufism'), setting out principles and illustrating them with statements by and instructive anecdotes about the masters of the time.

While Sarrāj represents the more conventional doctrinal approach espoused by the main line of Sufis in the school of Junayd (d. 910) and such authorities, Ernst also

includes a piece from the *Kitāb at-tawāsīn* by Junayd's maverick disciple Ḥallāj (d. 922) to present a less orthodox and more esoteric point of view, enlarging the doctrinal perspective.

Two vital themes in Ernst's ramification of the texts into topical units are 'Spiritual Practice' and the all-important relationship between master and disciple. The latter section features a piece from Qushayrī's seminal *Risāla*, a doctrinal work of equal importance to Sarrāj's *al-Luma'*. It presents as succinct a presentation of the relationship between guide and devotee from the Sufi point of view as could be found anywhere, being full of such truisms as emphasis on the fact that initiation of disciple to master is, in fact, a matter of "establishing the covenant" between the devotee and God (p. 151). The very dryness of Qushayrī's line of expression gives a particular value to his text which might be missed by the aspirant immersed in the ecstasies of the prose of a Ḥallāj or a Rūzbihān. The two lines of approach—the ecstatic and the rational—are complementary to one another when it comes to explaining things.

One particular gem of the compendium is Ernst's treatment of the role of music in Sufi practice, which is exceptionally well judged in its subtlety and sensitivity. After an illuminating preface the compiler presents two eye-opening texts, one by the ever-instructive Rūzbihān and a contemporary manual bringing together hundreds of years of practical experience in a summum of good counsel. This section alone has untold value for the lay person seeking a true insight into the nature of Sufi doctrine and practice.

An equally delicate matter which is just as instructively presented is the role of women in Sufism. Indeed, the section on women saints serves in its own right as an important spin-off of the compendium representing a weighty contribution to the cause of restoring the position of dignity which women enjoyed in early Islam and have main-

tained in the less Arabicized regions, such as areas in the Indo-Iranian sphere of influence—notably the Persianized Abbasid caliphate in Iraq when it was still steeped in the Iranian culture inherited from its central position in the pre-Islamic Persian empire—or the farflung terrains of Southeast Asia and West Africa.

In his prefatory remarks to the excerpts concerning the wife and daughter of Aḥmad ar-Rifā'ī (d. 1178) of the Iraq-centered Rifa'ī order, Rābi'a bint Abī Bakr (d. 1216) and Zaynab bint ar-Rifā'ī (d. 1232), Ernst notes that the biographer "unambiguously describes them as scholars and as spiritual masters superior to men" (p. 190).

In addition, his introduction to the whole section on women saints (pp. 179-92) gives an eloquent exposé on the role of women in mystical Islam as it actually was, unclouded by the prejudicial treatment given by more male-chauvinistically oriented biographers.

He concludes this brilliantly documented discussion with some revealing comments about the famous Rābi'a al-'Adawiyya (d. 801), noting "her amazing ability to cut to the essence of any spiritual problem, which she does typically by a kind of one-upmanship of the chief male Sufis of the day" (p. 182).

In his section on 'Divine and Human Love' Ernst is able, through his presentation of Rūzbihān's thought and writings, to present a more understanding picture of this fundamental

of Sufism than any Anglo-Saxon scholar has managed to do up to now. No lay person can begin to comprehend the doctrine of Sufism without grasping the fact that the relationship between devotee and God is precisely that of lover and Beloved. In the West Catholics have tended to focus their love on Jesus as such or on his mother Mary, while Protestants and Jews have emphasized the fear of God over the love of Him. Thus, Westerners have a yawning conceptual abyss to cross before they can fathom the nature of love in Sufism—love as *eros*, not as *agape*,



though expressed in the latter sense by the individual Sufi in his or her dealings with the material world.

The book has eight rubrics under which the excerpts are classified. There are no notes to the texts, though there is a useful appendix of Koranic verses and Prophetic Traditions. The sole bibliographical data is contained in a section devoted to 'Notes on Sources'. The book is attractively presented and highly readable for its fluent translation and its illuminative presentation.

—TERRY GRAHAM

The Book of Awakening

by Mark Nepo

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£16.95 (pbk)

There are very few books in this world which elicit the question, 'Why have I such an array of books on this subject when this one would suffice?' The entry of Mark Nepo's *Book of Awakening* into my life not only presented this question but also initiated an immediate removal of the other six inspirational books waiting in a tumbled line by my bed, making space in my overcrowded life for the simplicity of one source of wisdom.

The Book of Awakening, which is beautifully produced by Conari Press, is in the form of a daybook, having an entry of wisdom for every day of the year. This allows us to take a dip into this vast ocean of insight every day or to dive in at random when the spirit moves us. Each page of wisdom is followed by a short and profound meditation on the topic at hand which helps put the reading into the context of one's own life, and is suggested in such a way that even the meditation-shy could be enticed to participate.

In his introduction, Mark describes his book as 'a companion and a soul-friend'. The description (of unknown origin) of a soul friend that I was sent recently by one of my soul-friends says this:

The soul friend was an important factor in spiritual health of Celtic Christianity. He/she was the confidant and spiritual advisor, not necessarily a priest and quite often a lay person.

I agree that this book can act as a soul friend, which is a different relationship than is possible with most wisdom books. And that is quite a gift to give to yourself or a friend. The key reason for the possibility of this almost human relationship with the book is, I believe, to be found in the divinely human writing style of the author.

Mark is born a poet whose eyes perceive the divine

patterning within the everyday experiences of life. He has crafted the art of painting that depth so that others may begin to see into and beyond the mundane. Each new entry seems to invite a deeper friendship of the soul as Mark lays himself bare in his truly personal stories of struggle and revelation. He interweaves his own perception with gems of collected treasures from many spiritual traditions, giving us access to his own spiritual advisers in their many forms.

He says of himself in one of his entries:

After breaking many things in life—hearts, heirlooms, robin's eggs—I am humbled to admit that the only difference I see on Earth between being strong or weak is the honesty with which we face ourselves, accept ourselves, and share ourselves, blemishes and all... Aside from the feeling of integrity that comes over me when I can fully be myself, I am finding that being who I am—not hiding any of myself—is a necessary threshold that I must meet or my life will not evolve.

His close friend, Wayne Muller, author of *How Then Shall We Live*, reveals of Mark in the foreword:

Mark had cancer, and it shook him awake. His descent into illness gave birth to an astonishing mindfulness. Now he invites us to use his eyes and heart and feel how awake our being alive can be. Having survived his cancer, Mark brings with him the eyes of a dying person who is grateful simply to breathe. But more than gratefulness, he brings wisdom, clarity, kindness and a passionate enthusiasm for sucking the marrow out of moments, out of the bones of time. If you ache to live this way then Mark is your guide.

Mark Nepo is no stranger to Sufi Magazine. The Spring 2000 issue has an article by him called 'How Does It Taste' which contains a selection of stories from *The Book Of Awakening*. Nevertheless, I want to end by sharing one of the shorter ones here so that the taste can be remembered, or, for some, tasted for the first time, leaving you to discern whether this book might feed your soul.

THE ORDINARY ART

Before fixing what you're looking at,
check what you're looking through

It was a beautiful sun-filled day. I had driven 300 miles to see her. She was ninety-four and had been in one room for close to eight months. I was her first-born grandson and she was so happy to see me. But after catching up we sat in silence on the edge of her bed, and finally, she complained how gray a day it was.

I realized then that her one window hadn't been cleaned for almost a year. When I said this, she chuckled, as only someone ninety-four can, and uttered