

## Sai Baba of Shirdi – A Sufi Saint

*This article discusses Sufism (Islamic mysticism) and the Hindu concept of Guru-bhakti, linking both to the spiritual path of devotion for devotees of Sai Baba.*

**S**ai Baba of Shirdi (1838 to 1918 AD) is regarded by many as a Sufi saint. In his time many of his devotees were Sufi Muslims. This article examines key teachings of Sufism and devotional Hinduism and relates it to the teachings of Baba. The common thread in both is that *unconditional surrender* to a spiritual Guru is a must for embarking on the spiritual path.

### The Philosophy

The Sufi Islamic traditions evolved over history with a degree of interaction with Hinduism. It is a school that includes philosophers and mystics.

Sufis believe that Sufi teachings are the essence of every religion, and indeed of the evolution of humanity as a whole.

Sufis focus on the internal or more spiritual aspects, such as perfecting one's faith and fighting one's own ego (*nafs*). Sufism is a very open-minded philosophy.

The Sufis focus on personal spirituality. They believe that God can be found in the human heart, an intuition shared by both Muslim and Hindu mystics, that paradise lay within - if you could find it. As the great mystic Jalaluddin Rumi put it:

“The heart is nothing but the sea of light... the place of the vision of God.”

The Sufis believe that all existence and all religions were one, merely different manifestations of the same divine reality. What was important was not the empty external ritual of the mosque or temple, but simply to understand that divinity can best be reached through the gateway of the human heart - that we all have paradise within us, if we know where to look.



The central concept in Sufism is 'love'. Sufis believe that, love is a projection of the essence of God to the universe. God desires to recognize beauty, and as if one looks at a mirror to see oneself, God "looks" at itself within the dynamics of nature.

Since everything is a reflection of God, the school of Sufism practices to see the beauty inside the apparent ugly, and to open arms

even to the most evil one. This *infinite tolerance* is expressed in the most beautiful way perhaps by the famous Sufi philosopher Mevlana:

"Come, come, whoever you are.  
Worshiper, Wanderer, Lover of Leaving;  
ours is not a caravan of despair. Though  
you have broken your vows a thousand  
times...Come, come again, Come."

Sufism with its Holy Men and visions, healings and miracles, and its emphasis on the individual's search for direct knowledge of the divine, has remarkable similarities to Hinduism, and historically the Sufis acted as a bridge between the two religions<sup>1</sup>.

One of the greatest Sufis Ibn Arabi, who lived more than 700 years ago expresses the universal spirit of the journey:

"My heart has become capable of every form:  
It is a pasture for gazelles  
And a convent for Christian monks  
And a temple for idols  
And the pilgrim's Ka'ba  
And the tables of the Torah  
And the book of the Koran.  
I follow the religion of love:  
Whatever way Love's camels take,  
That is my religion and my faith"

## The Spiritual Path

*The book 'Mystics of Islam', by R. A. Nicholson, first published in 1914, is a classic and definitive introduction to the message of Sufism. This section discusses excerpts from the book.*

Mystics of every race and creed have described the progress of the spiritual life as a Journey or a pilgrimage. The Sufi who sets out to seek God calls himself a 'traveller' (*salik*); he advances by slow 'stages'

(*maqamat*) along a 'path' (*tariqat*) to the goal of union with Reality (*fana fi'l-Haqq*).

### The Stages

The 'path' expounded by the author of the *Kitab al-Luma*, perhaps the oldest comprehensive treatise on Sufism, consists of the following seven 'stages', each of which (except the first member of the series) is the result of the 'stages' immediately preceding it- (1) Repentance (2) abstinence, (3) renunciation, (4) poverty, (5) patience, (6) trust in God, (7) satisfaction.

The 'stages' constitute the *ascetic and ethical* discipline of the Sufi, and must be carefully distinguished from the so-called 'states' (*ahwal*, plural of *hal*), which form a similar *psychological* chain.

### The States

The writer quoted above enumerates ten 'states'- Meditation, nearness to God, love, fear, hope, longing, intimacy, tranquility, contemplation, and certainty. While the 'stages' can be acquired and mastered by one's own efforts, the 'states' are spiritual feelings and dispositions over which a man has no control:

"They descend from God into his heart,  
without his being able to repel them  
when they come or to retain them when  
they go."

The Sufi's 'path' is not finished until he has traversed all the 'stages,' making himself perfect in every one of them before advancing to the next, and has also experienced whatever 'states' it pleases God to bestow upon him. Then, and only then, is he permanently raised to the higher planes of consciousness which Sufis call 'the Gnosis' (*ma'rifat*) and 'the Truth' (*haqiqat*), where the 'seeker' (*talib*) becomes the

<sup>1</sup> 'The Real Islam', William Dalrymple, TimeAsia Magazine 2004

'knower' or 'gnostic' ('*arif*), and realises that knowledge, knower, and known are One.

## Repentance

Repentance is described as the awakening of the soul from the slumber of heedlessness, so that the sinner becomes aware of his evil ways and feels contrition for past disobedience. He is not truly penitent, however, unless (1) he at once abandons the sin or sins of which he is conscious, and (2) firmly resolves that he will never return to these sins in the future. If he should fail to keep his vow, he must again turn to God, whose mercy is infinite. A certain well-known Sufi repented seventy times and fell back into sin seventy times before he made lasting repentance.

## Sufi Teacher

If the 'seeker' follows the general rule, he will take a director (Sheykh, Pir, Murshid), *i.e.* a holy man of ripe experience and profound knowledge, whose *least word is absolute law* to his disciples. A 'seeker' who attempts to traverse the 'Path' without assistance receives little sympathy. He is likened to a tree that for want of the gardener's care brings forth 'none or bitter fruit.'

## Removing the Nafs

The Sufi teachers gradually built up a system of asceticism and moral culture which is founded on the fact that there is in man an element of evil - the lower or appetitive soul. This evil self, the seat of passion and lust, is called *nafs*. It constitutes the great obstacle to the attainment of union with God.

Mortification of the *nafs* is the chief work of devotion, and leads, directly or indirectly, to

the contemplative life. All the Sufi teachers are agreed that no disciple who neglects this duty will ever learn the rudiments of Sufism. The principle of mortification is that the *nafs* should be weaned from those things to which it is accustomed, that it should be encouraged to resist its passions, that its pride should be broken, and that it should be brought through suffering and tribulation to recognise the vileness of its original nature and the impurity of its actions.

The outward methods of mortification, include fasting, silence, and solitude. However, the higher ethical discipline which completes the Path is self-mortification. Self-mortification, as advanced Sufis understand it, is a moral transmutation of the inner man. The lower self can and should be purged of its attributes, which are wholly evil. These attributes - ignorance, pride, envy, uncharitableness, etc. - are extinguished, and replaced by the opposite qualities, when the will is surrendered to God and when the mind is concentrated on Him. Therefore the Sufi concept of 'dying to self' is really 'living in God'.

## 'Dhikr' or Recollection

The term *dhikr*-recollection' - signifies 'mentioning,' 'remembering,' or simply 'thinking of'. The Sufis made a practice of repeating the name of God or some religious formula, *e.g.* "Glory to Allah" (*subhan Allah*), accompanying the mechanical intonation with an intense concentration of every faculty upon the single word or phrase; and they attach great value to this irregular litany, which enables them to enjoy uninterrupted communion with God. Recollection may be either spoken or silent, but it is best, that tongue and mind should co-operate.

A Sufi gives us a gist of the matter:

"The first stage of *dhikr* is to forget self, and the last stage is the effacement of the worshipper in the act of worship, without consciousness of worship, and such absorption in the object of worship as precludes return to the subject thereof."

## Hindu Perspective – Guru-Bhakti

*Here is what Swami Chidananda says about Guru-bhakti:*

God is an unknown entity. We have not seen God. We have not touched, nor tasted, nor smelt Him. We've only heard about Him. We can only infer Him. We can only imagine Him.

But then, if we are able to see in a human individual manifestations of holiness, of sanctity, of purity, of sublimity, of nobility, of goodness, of loftiness of conduct, character, nature, sentiment, thought, feeling and action, if we see something out of the ordinary something extraordinary, something special, a manifestation of those qualities that we have been taught to associate only with God then we say: "If such a human being can exist, God must exist. Otherwise, from whence do these qualities come which we do not normally see in anyone?" When we see this divinity, this holiness, this sanctity, we begin to realise:

"Yes, God I have not seen, but godliness I have seen. All the qualities attributed to God by the scriptures, by saints and sages, in all religious contexts those I see in an unusual measure, in an extraordinary measure, in this being. Because I have seen this being and this being is known to me, I am assured that God is. I know there must be a God."

And in the Vedic tradition the *guru* is such a being. The guru becomes for us a visible God. God reveals Himself through the guru.

The guru thus becomes the linking factor, a channel for putting the wandering, lost individual Soul, back into contact with its source, God, the Universal Soul. And just as the guru is a channel for the individual soul to re-link itself with God, even so, if we can create a channel between ourselves and our guru, then that channel will become the effecting means of receiving from the guru *guru-kripa*, all that the guru is the knowledge of the guru, the sanctity of the guru, the purity of the guru, the spirituality of the guru.

And that channel is called *guru-bhakti*. That is why the Svetasvatara Upanishad states:

"If you have supreme devotion to God and the same kind of devotion to your guru, then to you, the essence, the subtle truths of the scriptures become revealed."

Thus it is that through *guru-bhakti* the seeker, the disciple, creates an effective link, a connection, a channel which enables the guru to share with the disciple what the guru has been endowed with from God.

So, we have to provide a way for the guru to give what he wishes to give. And that is through *guru-bhakti*, devotion, where there is no place for the ego. If the thought comes, "I have got great *guru-bhakti*," then finished, that *bhakti* becomes cancelled, it is nullified. You yourself must become the very embodiment of that love, that devotion. There should be no awareness of some being, some person having that quality of devotion. Then it becomes a subtle spiritual ego. The very purpose of the existence of the guru is to remove the separatist I-

consciousness, the consciousness of being a separate being or entity, and if guru-bhakti becomes a means of boosting and sustaining that ego, egoism, then it loses its purpose and becomes self-defeating.

Thus true guru-bhakti is egoless, humble. The *gopis* of Vrindavan did not know that they were great devotees of Krishna. They said:

“All we know is that He is the one object to be adored. We don’t know anything else. We cannot do anything but adore Him. We are that adoration. It is our very self. We are not different from that. Take it away from us and we will die, we will cease to exist.”

They were filled with that love, not with egoistical awareness of that love.

The greater the growth of devotion and the greater the reverence for the guru, the greater is the inflow of the guru’s grace. The greater the desire to carry out the ideals and principles of the guru in life and the greater the keen eagerness and firm determination to carry out the instructions of the guru faithfully, meticulously, day after day, in one’s daily activities and life, the greater is the inflow of the guru’s grace. Remember that “Obedience is better than reverence”:

A disciple was asked to take the guru’s cattle to pasture. He had to be with the cattle all day. The guru did not ask his wife to prepare any lunch for him, and he did not have permission to drink milk from the cows. So the whole day he went hungry, only quenching his thirst with water. Days, months, years passed this way.

This is the type of guru-bhakti the Hindu scriptures talk about. It is not mere

sentiment. It is true guru-bhakti which has immense strength and *sattvic* (pure, higher) determination, behind it. Guru-bhakti is divine power, it is divine force, not merely silly human sentiment, not merely emotion. Vivekananda came down heavily upon mere sentiment and emotion.

## Sai Baba of Shirdi as a Sufi Master

Sai Baba is an incredible enigma. Baba, who some devotees call the CEO among Perfect Masters – never advocated any general spiritual rules. This was in the larger interests of catering to humanity at large i.e., to devotees at different stages of evolution. Baba had a rich repertoire of spiritual skill-sets and was an epitome of *compassion*.

The spiritual remedy he prescribes to his devotees in *Shri Sai Satcharita* (the Holy Book of Sai devotees), be it performing a full weeks recitation of Gods name, or reading of a holy book, or feeding an animal etc. is tailored to the spiritual needs of the individual devotees and is absolutely context-specific.

Furthermore, while Baba himself was a non-vegetarian, a Yogi and celibate, yet there is no general rule arising from his own life. For example, for some he recommended celibacy, while for others the life of a householder. Baba did not believe in fasting at all.

## Loving Devotion

Baba’s path was a simple one free of any rituals that required love and devotion to him. This could be expressed through reading, hearing or singing about his Leelas – his divine stories written in *Shri Sai Satcharita*.

Baba's words are pregnant with meaning and never hollow. Hear his stories with respect, and think and meditate on them, assimilate them. This is the way of happiness and contentment and will also lead to direct benefits. Baba says:

"If My stories are listened to, all the diseases will be got rid of".

Baba's name is the best purifier of our mind. *Chanting Baba's name ("Sai, Sai") is the easiest spiritual practice.* Feel real love for Baba and do all our actions for his sake. Pursue formless meditation or on his form.

Two of his key sayings are:

- "Allah Malik Hai" (*God is the Master*)
- "Shradha Saburi" (*Have Faith and Patience*)

## The Eleven Assurances of Baba

1. Whosoever puts their feet on Shirdi soil, their sufferings will come to an end.
2. The wretched and miserable would rise into plenty of joy and happiness, as soon as they climb the steps of my Samadhi (Mandir).
3. Whatever you do, wherever you may be, ever bear this in mind that I am always aware of everything you do.
4. He who meditates upon me, chants my name and sings about my deeds, I will increase his devotion, he is transformed and his karma is destroyed. I stay by his side always.
5. I am the slave of my devotee. I love devotion. He who loves me most always sees me. He who withdraws his heart from the world and loves me is my true lover and he merges in me like a river in the sea. I am dependent on him, who thinks of me and eats nothing without offering to me, such a devotee will merge with me.

6. If you make me the sole object of your thoughts and aims you will gain Paramatma (God).
7. If you cast your burden on me, I shall surely bear it.
8. If you seek my advice and help, it shall be given to you at once.
9. There will be no dearth of food or clothing in my devotees home.
10. I shall be active and vigorous even from my tomb. My tomb shall bless and speak to the needs of my devotees. Even after my Maha Samadhi, I shall be with you the moment you think of me.
11. If you look to me, I look to you.

In Sai Baba's own words:

"Those who are fortunate and whose demerits have vanished; take to My worship. It is My special characteristic to free any person, who surrenders completely to Me, and who does worship Me faithfully, and who remembers Me, and meditates on Me constantly. I shall draw out My devotees from the jaws of Death."

The many miracles which continue to happen to devotees all over the world, so many years after his Maha Samadhi (the day he decided to leave his mortal body), are testimony to his spiritual stature. Hence, we must take Baba's teachings to heart and practice what he told us.

*Sai Baba is an agent of God. In the Sufi tradition, the devotee attains God through merger with Baba – Guru is God!*

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To know more about Baba's *Path of Devotion* and his sayings visit:  
<http://www.saisansthan.com/The-Path-Of-Devotion.pdf>

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