

Opening the Heart: Compassion in Sufism

Abriendo el Corazón: La Compasión en el Sufismo

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Abstract

This paper discusses the concept of compassion from Islamic and Sufi perspectives. Compassion and Mercy are divine Attributes, in Arabic *ar-Rahman*, *ar-Rahim*, which are the most commonly used divine Attributes.

According to the Sufi Psychology we possess seven "souls," or evolutionary stages of development. These are the mineral soul, vegetable soul, animal soul, personal soul, human soul, secret soul, and the secret of secrets. Compassion begins at the human soul, the stage at which the heart opens. Compassion is a sign of mature human development.

The human soul, secret soul and secret of secrets are located in the spiritual heart which is the source of creativity, wisdom, and spirituality. In Sufism opening the heart is an essential spiritual practice.

Keywords: compassion, sufism, heart, Rumi, seven souls

Resumen

En este trabajo se analiza el concepto de compasión desde las perspectivas islámica y sufí. La compasión y la misericordia son atributos divinos, denominados en árabe *ar-Rahman*, *ar-Rahim*, que son los atributos divinos más utilizados. De acuerdo con la Psicología Sufí, poseemos siete "almas" o etapas evolutivas del desarrollo. Estas son el alma mineral, alma vegetal, alma animal, alma personal, alma humana, alma secreta, y el secreto de los secretos. La compasión comienza en el alma humana, la etapa en la que el corazón se abre. La compasión es un signo de desarrollo humano maduro. El alma humana, el alma secreta y el secreto de los secretos se encuentran en el corazón espiritual, que es la fuente de la creatividad, la sabiduría y la espiritualidad. En el Sufismo abrir el corazón es una práctica espiritual esencial.

Palabras clave: compasión, sufismo, corazón, Rumi, siete almas

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In Islam, God is most commonly referred to as *ar-Rahman*, *ar-Rahim*, the infinitely Compassionate and Merciful, the infinitely Beneficent who showers blessings on creation. Compassion is not a completely accurate translation. Closer is “Beneficent,” an obsolete term for God as the source of all that benefits everything in creation. As Sufis we seek to express this divine Attribute through charity, generosity, sympathy and compassion (Frager, 2012).

The Seven Souls

According to Sufi psychology (Frager, 1999), every human being has seven “souls,” or seven levels of consciousness. The seven levels of soul reflect human evolutionary heritage. They are the mineral soul, vegetable soul, animal soul, personal soul, human soul, secret (or angelic) soul and the secret of secrets.

The first four levels are located in the physical body. Compassion and spirituality do not begin until the human soul, located in the spiritual heart. To be human is to feel and express compassion.

Rumi describes human development as a process of progression through these souls (Chittick, 1983, p. 79),

I died as mineral and became a plant,
I died as plant and rose to animal
I died as animal and became human.
Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?
Yet once more I shall die as human,
to soar with angels blest;
But even from angelhood I must pass on:
all except God does perish.
When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,
I shall become what no mind ever conceived

The Mineral Soul

The mineral soul, the *ruh madeni*, is located in the skeletal system. Imbalance in the mineral soul can result in either extreme flexibility or rigidity. For example we say someone has “no backbone” or they are “spineless.” That is, they find it hard to hold a position, to stand up for what they believe. The other extreme is someone who has become calcified, unbending, “fossilized.”

They are incapable of responding flexibly and appropriately to the environment. Some people are “stiff necked.” Their pride prevents them from changing. Others are “thick skulled,” unable to take in new information. A Sufi story (Frager, 1999, p. 99) describes this aspect of the mineral soul:

Bahlul was an unpredictable Sufi master, whose behavior often astonished the people of Baghdad. One day he set up shop in the marketplace with three skulls in front of him. Each skull had a sign in front of it. The first sign read “Free.” The second sign read “Two Cents,” and the third sign read “Priceless, Not for Sale.”

One woman came up and asked about these strange prices. Bahlul said, “Let me show you.” He took a long skewer and tried to put it through the ear hole of the first skull, but it would not go through. “See, this skull is absolutely worthless. Nothing goes in.” Then Bahlul tried the skewer on the second skull. This time the skewer passed easily through both ear holes and slipped out the other side. “This skull is not much better. Nothing stays in.” Finally Bahlul tried the third skull. The skewer passed easily through the first ear hole but not through the second. “This skull is truly precious. Whatever goes in, stays in.”

The Vegetable Soul

The vegetable soul, the *ruh nabati*, is related to the digestive system. It is related to nutrition and growth, functions first found in the plant world. In the womb we were all very much like plants. We were rooted to our mother’s uterus by our umbilical cord and we took in nourishment through it as plants do from their roots.

There is great intelligence in the vegetable soul. The finest biologist cannot consciously grow hair on her head, for example. Basic physical functions are organized by the vegetable soul which regulates all the basic bodily operations that occur outside conscious awareness and control.

Imbalance in the vegetable soul results in either over- or under-activity. An underactive vegetable soul may cause laziness; someone in a coma has “become a vegetable.” The other extreme is someone who is hyperactive. They cannot sit still.

They cannot relax and rejuvenate themselves, which is a basic vegetative function.

Plants have very limited ability to react to the environment. They have little or no mobility or flexibility in their responses. Plants do not learn or plan. With the evolution of the animal soul, life developed mobility, motivation, and the capacity for learning.

The Animal Soul

The animal soul, the *ruh haywani*, is related to the circulatory system (Frager, 1999). The more efficient the circulatory system, the greater the capacity for movement. You can see this in the reptiles, whose circulatory system is not a fully developed as mammals and who require warm weather to be fully active.

Movement includes motivation and emotion (motive-ation and e-motion), which both have the same root meaning. The most basic animal motivation is to move toward whatever is rewarding or nourishing (passion or desire) and to move away from whatever is painful or toxic (fear or anger). Freud called this the pleasure principle. These instincts are basic to survival and underlie most of our behavior.

Imbalance in the animal soul results in either lack of energy and motivation or in unbridled anger or passion. Someone who has no motivation or feels no emotions is passive and listless. Others are easily “overcome” by their emotions and tend toward anger, lust, or gluttony.

The Personal Soul

The personal soul, the *ruh nafsani*, is the first level of humanity (Frager, 1999). It is related to our highly developed nervous system. The complex brain allows greater memory and more complex thinking and planning than animals. Compared to animals humans have a far greater capacity to cope with the environment.

The personal soul is barely the beginning of becoming fully human. The heart is not yet developed yet. Imbalance in the personal soul results in an unthinking, unreflective approach to life, or to an emphasis on abstract thinking at the expense of everything else. Great intelligence does not guarantee compassion. Serial killers and sadists are human, but they lack the capacity for love and compassion. They are stunted human beings.

The Human Soul

The human soul, or *ruh insani*, is located in the spiritual heart. The spiritual heart is not the physical muscle located in the chest. The spiritual heart is the source of compassion, inner light, inspiration, creativity, and love. It is not a physical organ and does not expire at death (Ozak, 1981).

This model implies a qualitative shift at the level of the human soul. We are now in the realm of the transpersonal. There can be no creative or spiritual life without the development of the human soul.

My Sufi master Safer Efendi explained that the head is like a computer. It is involved with storage and manipulation of data, but not with the creation of anything new. Creativity comes from the heart and you cannot become truly creative unless you love what you are doing.

The Secret Soul

The secret soul, or *ruh sirr*, remembers God. It is also located within the spiritual heart.

The secret soul is also known as the angelic soul. You might even call it your higher human soul just as the personal soul is the lower human soul. It contains what is the finest in each human being.

The Secret of Secrets

The secret of secrets, the *sirr-ul-asrar*, is transcendent, beyond space and time. It is the soul that God breathed into Adam and Eve. That is, this soul is a divine gift to humanity. It is also known as the soul of your soul.

The Spiritual Heart

The spiritual heart is a temple built by God to house the divine within each of us. In a *hadith qudsi*, a divine revelation, God disclosed, “I, who cannot fit into all the heavens and earths, fit into the heart of the sincere believer.” The temple of the heart was built by God to house God within (Ozak, 1988).

One goal of Sufism is to teach our hearts to pray. It is relatively easy to learn the outer form of prayer. Teaching our hearts to pray takes longer. The outside is always easier than the inside. For example, it is not difficult to make our outsides clean by bathing and putting on clean clothing, but it can be very difficult to cleanse our insides. Our

hearts become cleansed through worship, compassionate service and remembrance of God (Frager, 1999).

One essential element in opening the heart is the practice of what we know. Heart knowledge is deepened by experience. My teacher Safer Efendi once said, with great humility, "I don't know a great deal about Sufism, but I have loved what I have learned, and I have lived it for over 40 years." These are the words of a real Sufi master. Sufism is a lived teaching. Knowledge that is applied brings wisdom; book learning alone results in mental and spiritual indigestion.

In the Middle East there are many stories of Nasruddin, a Sufi master who taught with a great deal of humor. In the following story (Frager, 1999, p. 30) Nasruddin teaches the importance of compassion and also difference between the experiential knowledge of the heart and the abstract knowledge of the head:

Nasruddin was serving as the local judge. A woman came to him with her son and complained that her son had an uncontrollable sweet tooth. She asked Nasruddin to tell the boy to stop eating sweets all the time. Nasruddin told her to bring her son back in two weeks. When they returned he simply said to the son, "Boy, I order you to stop eating sweets!"

The mother asked, "Why did you make us wait for two weeks? Couldn't you have said this to my son when we first came to you?"

Nasruddin answered, "No, I couldn't possibly have said that to your son two weeks ago."

"Why not?" asked the mother.

"You see, I love sweets myself. First I had to stop eating sweets, and only then could I tell your son to stop."

In a real sense, compassion begins at home. Nasruddin was able to teach with real compassion only after struggling with the same challenge as the boy.

Our knowledge is not complete unless we act on what we know. My first Sufi teacher Muzaffer Ozak taught that every action affects our hearts (Frager, 2009). A compassionate word or act softens and opens our hearts, while a harsh word or harmful act hardens and closes our hearts. Muzaffer Efendi added that our actions also affect the

world around us. He said every compassionate word causes a rose to bloom while every harmful word causes a thorn to grow. As our hearts begin to open, we become guided by our inner wisdom and intuition.

As our hearts open we begin to have access to the wisdom of the heart. Then it is essential to act on our inner wisdom and insight. It is important that our outer actions are in harmony with the inner process of heart opening. It is often a struggle. Even though we know how we should behave, our old habits and tendencies still affect us at times.

If we would only remember that our hearts are divine temples, we would be transformed. We would remember that we are not worldly creatures seeking the spiritual, but we are spiritual beings seeking to discover our own true nature. What we truly are, what we are all seeking, is to be found in our heart of hearts. Knowing this is the root of compassion.

If we remember that everyone's heart is a divine temple, then we would see everyone else differently and behave with far greater compassion and caring (Ozak, 1988). All our relationships would be transformed. This is the foundation for the Sufi practice of service. In serving others, we are serving the Divine in them. When we remember that the human heart is a holy shrine, we become more compassionate and heedful in all our dealings with others. Remembering to honor the heart in each person is a great discipline. It is so easy to forget.

To be a Sufi is to remember that the heart of each person is God's temple. It is to honor and serve others. Many hearts have been wounded in this world, and we can serve God's creation by working to heal those wounded hearts. This kind of compassionate service will also heal and open our own hearts as well.

One day someone asked a Sufi teacher how to reach God. The teacher replied that the ways to God are as many as there are created beings. The Sufi master went on, "The shortest and easiest is to serve others, not to bother others, and to make others happy."

Sufism gives us a spiritual context in which we can relate to others, a context based on the fundamental belief that God is within each of us (Arasteh, 1980). We can see both our own and others' faults within this context. Some people are stingy, others don't keep their word, and some have bad tempers. But that is not who we truly are. We all have good and bad habits, but our habits are

temporary. What is real and eternal is the Divine within each of us. The Truth is whatever helps us come closer to God, whatever brings out the Divine within us. That is why compassion is so important. Anything that obscures God is not Truth. From this perspective the popular psychology notions of “sharing” and unloading on others all our negative thoughts and feelings is absolutely wrong (Shafii, 1985).

If we focus on another’s faults, we will make those faults real. This affects us as well as the person we are criticizing. It closes our hearts. If we act compassionately toward someone else, we do them a service and we also do ourselves a service. For example, if someone else has a bad temper and we talk about their temper and how they have hurt others, we harm them and we also harm ourselves. Their temper may be a “fact,” but that is not who they truly are. The negative traits of the personality can be transformed, and at our core we are all divine souls.

As Sufis we should try not to let our egos get upset by someone else’s ego. We have all done this often enough in the past. Sufism teaches us to change how we see ourselves and each other. We must first see the Divine in ourselves. Once we view ourselves as having God within our own hearts, we will be able to see others with love and compassion

An Exercise for Opening the Heart

The more aware we are of our heart centers, the more our hearts become open and energized. While we are going about our daily business, we can develop the habit of blessing everyone we meet and opening our hearts to everyone.

One of my teachers suggested we think of our hearts as miniature suns that radiate light to everyone and everything we meet. We can send blessings to the trees and grass around us as well as the people we see. While our heads and our mouths are busy with conversation, we can let the light from our hearts touch and warm the hearts of others. It is as if there is a second, compassionate heart interchange that is going on beneath the conversation. Our hearts are alike; all our hearts yearn for divine light.

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