Chapter 8

Ṣūfism

8.1 Al-Ghazālī on the path of the Ṣūfīs

On al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) and the book from which this passage is taken, *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* ('Deliverance from error'), see above, section 6.4. As was suggested above, the entire treatise is probably better understood as a work of epistemology. The aim is to show that right knowledge will deliver one from error. Here, he speaks autobiographically about the knowledge of the Ṣūfīs, the last group whom he describes on his quest for knowledge. It is therefore with the Ṣūfis that al-Ghazālī finds his thirst for certain knowledge of the truth satisfied. He describes the practical steps necessary for purifying one's heart, and the importance of direct experience, or ' taste', for mystical knowledge. Al-Ghazālī discovers that the path of the Ṣūfī saints can bestow on the seeker direct experiences that are comparable with the experiences of prophets, in this way providing irrefutable proof of the truths of religion. Following the discussion provided here, he is able to argue for the reality of prophecy in general, through a faculty of perception grounded in the soul, which can be verified by non-prophets through 'taste' (i.e., direct experience) on the path of the Ṣūfīs.

Further reading

Farid Jabre, *La notion de la* ma'rifa *chez Ghazali*, second edition, Beirut 1986.

Eric L. Ormsby, 'The taste of truth: the structure of experience in al-Ghazālī's *al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl*,' in Wael B. Hallaq, Donald P. Little (eds), *Islamic studies presented to Charles J. Adams*, Leiden 1991, pp. 133–52.

Source text

Farid Jabre, *Al-Munqid min aḍalāl (Erreur de délivrance)*, Beirut 1959, excerpts from pp. 35–40 of the Arabic text.

Section: The path of the Ṣūfīs

1. When I had done with these sciences, I turned my efforts to the Ṣūfī way. I came to know that their way became complete only through both knowledge and practice. The sum of their sciences is the removal of the soul's deficiencies, and cleansing it of its reprehensible and vicious qualities, so as to achieve a heart empty of all save God and adorned with the constant remembrance of God.

2. Knowledge was easier for me than practice. So I began by acquiring their knowledge from their books, such as the *Qūt al-qulūb* of Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī [d. 386/998], the works of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī, and the disparate fragments deriving from al-Junayd, al-Shiblī, Abū Yazīd al-Basṭāmī and others. In the end I understood their aims in so far as these were a matter of knowledge, and appreciated their way as far as was possible through learning and listening. And I realized that their most singular characteristic was such as could be appreciated not through learning but only through 'taste', 'state' (*ḥāl*) and change of qualities. How different it is to know the definitions of health and of fullness, together with their causes and conditions, and to be healthy and full; to know the definition of drunkenness . . . and to be drunk. In fact the drunkard, while drunk, does not know the definition or the science of drunkenness – he knows nothing about it – while the sober man may know the definition and the principles of drunkenness, and be quite free of the state itself. The doctor, while sick, may know the definition and the causes of health, and its medicines, and yet lack health. Similar to this is the difference between knowing the truth of asceticism together with its conditions and causes, and being in a 'state' comprising asceticism and abstention from things of this world.

3. I knew then for sure that they were masters of 'states' and not purveyors of words. All that could be achieved through knowledge, I had achieved. What remained could not be learned through study and listening but required 'taste' and practice.

4. Now, I had acquired through the sciences I had studied and the paths I had followed in investigating the two types of science, revealed and rational, a firm and certain faith in God, in prophecy and in the last day. These three principles of faith had become firmly rooted in my soul, not through specific discursive proof, but through causes, connections and experiences, the details of which could not be enumerated. It was also evident to me that I had no expectation of the happiness of the other world except through piety, and through control of the desires of the self. The foundation of all this lay in cutting the link between the heart and worldly things, through turning away from the abode of illusion and towards the abode of eternity, and advancing with the utmost resolution

towards God. It could not be achieved except through abandonment of rank and wealth, and flight from distraction and entanglement. . . .

[Al-Ghazālī here describes the difficulties he had in achieving a determination to abandon position, fame, comfort and so forth. Ultimately, however, his plans change.]

5. I left Baghdad. I distributed such wealth as I had, preserving only a bare sufficiency, and maintenance for the children. (I found excuse for this in the thought that the wealth of Iraq is earmarked for the welfare of society, it being a *waqf* on behalf of all Muslims. I could see no wealth in the whole world that a scholar might more fittingly draw on for his children.) I went into Damascus, and stayed there for about two years, with no distractions save retirement and seclusion, spiritual exercises and moral striving. I was concerned to cleanse the soul, to train the morals, and to purify the heart for memory of God, in accord with what I had learnt from the books of the Ṣūfīs. I practised seclusion for a while in the mosque at Damascus, climbing the minaret during the day and locking its door behind me. Then I travelled to Jerusalem, entering there the Dome of the Rock every day and locking its door behind me. Then I was moved to carry out the duty of Pilgrimage, to seek help from the blessings of Mecca and Medina, to visit the tomb of the prophet of God, after visiting the tomb of Abraham. So I went to the Hijaz. Then various cares and the summons of my children drew me back to my homeland, and I returned there, after having been the furthest of all creation from such an act. There, too, I preferred retirement, out of desire for seclusion and the purification of the heart. But the vicissitudes of time, the demands of my family and the necessities of making a living all conspired to change in me the nature of my desire and to sully the purity of my seclusion. Only at scattered moments did my situation achieve purity. My desire for this end was, however, not affected and though obstacles pushed me away, I would return. So it was for ten years. During these periods of seclusion various things were revealed to me that can be neither computed nor adequately analysed.

6. As much as I shall say – that it might be beneficial – is this, that I came to know for sure that the Ṣūfīs were following the path of God, the Ṣūfīs in particular, and that their conduct was the best of conduct, their path the surest of paths, their morals the purest of morals. Even more, if the wisdom and intellect of the wise were united, together with the knowledge of those *'ulamā'* who understand the secrets of the law, in order to change one aspect of their conduct and morals and to replace it with something better, they would be unable to do so. For all their movements and their ways of being still, in their manifest and in their hidden aspects, are derived from the light of the lamp of prophecy; and there is not, on the face of the earth, beyond the lamp of prophecy any higher source of light.

7. What can one say about a path for which the purification – the first of its conditions – is complete purification of the heart from all save God; to which the key – corresponding to the act of reciting the opening of the daily prayers – is complete drowning of the heart in memory of God; and of which the end is

complete annihilation in God? This indeed is its end only in relation to its beginnings, those which belong to the realm of choice and acquisition. These in truth represent the first part of the way; what precedes this is but, as it were, the entrance hall.

8. Early in the way visions begin, such that Ṣūfīs in waking hours perceive angels and the spirits of prophets, and hear from them voices, and derive from them benefits. Their state then proceeds from the witnessing of forms and likenesses to levels of perception which transcend the boundaries of speech. None who tries to give expression to these can do so without his words containing manifest error which it is impossible to guard against. But, overall, the matter culminates in a closeness which one group have imagined to be 'incarnation' (*ḥulūl*), another group 'union' (*ittiḥād*) and another 'connection' (*wuṣūl*). All of this is error. The nature of the error we have explained in our book *al-Maqṣad al-asnā* ('The noblest aim'). Indeed one to whom such a state is given should say no more than the poet:

> What happened, happened; I'll not remember it.
> Don't ask about it; just think well of it.

In sum, he who is not granted anything through 'taste', will be able to perceive of the truth of prophecy only the name. The miracles of the saints are in truth [the equivalent of] the first steps of the prophets. Such was the first state of the prophet of God when he came to Mount Ḥirā' to practise there seclusion with his Lord and worship, so that the bedouin said, 'Muḥammad is in love with his Lord!'

9. This is a state which can be realized through 'taste' by those who follow the path of the Ṣūfīs. Those who are not granted 'taste' may become certain of its existence through experience and intimacy, if they increase their companionship with the Ṣūfīs until they achieve a sure and certain understanding based on circumstantial evidence. Those who share their company will derive from them this faith, for they are a people whose companions are not left in distress. Finally, for those who are not granted the possibility of the companionship of Ṣūfīs, let them acquire sure knowledge of the possibility of that state through rational demonstration, as we have explained in our book, *ʿAjāʾib al-qalb*, 'The wonders of the heart', contained in the *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-dīn* [Book 21]. To comprehend this state through rational demonstration is 'knowledge'. To participate in that state is 'taste'. To accept it as a result of experience and intimacy, with good will, is 'faith' (*īmān*). These are the three degrees referred to in, *God raises those of you who believe and those of you who are given knowledge in degrees* (Q 58/11).

10. Beyond these degrees are an ignorant people. They deny the basis of all this, they express astonishment at such claims, they listen and they scoff. They say, 'Amazing!' How they rave! But concerning them God has said, *Amongst them are some who listen to you, but when they leave you they say to those who have been given knowledge, What did he say so haughtily? They are the ones upon*

whose hearts God has set a seal. They follow their whims (Q 47/16). *God has made them deaf and blind* (Q 47/23).

11. What became clear to me through my experience of their path is the truth and the essence of prophecy.