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## **Meta-principles of Sufism: What can we learn from Ahmad Sirhindi's *Maktūbāt*?**

Arthur Buehler<sup>1</sup>

First, I would like to thank organizers of Imam-ı Rabbani Sempozyumu, Ahmad Topbaş, Professor Süleyman Derin, and Professor Necdet Tosun and all the others who made this conference possible. At the same time, I would like to acknowledge my debt to Ahmad Sirhindi for his sharing the depths of his Sufi experience. It is that experience that will be the focus of my talk. However, we scholars in the academic study of Sufism (and all other fields), have few ways of understanding Sufi experience. The outcome is that Sufi experience is ignored and scholars concentrate on what they do understand, namely historical developments in Sufism or so-called Sufi concepts. This is what we were all trained to do, but we can do more than this. If we cannot then we can encourage our students to go beyond the current disciplinary boundaries of Sufi studies.

Where I work in the English-speaking world, scholars of Sufism have shown extremely little interest in Ahmad Sirhindi over the past two decades. Part of this is their lack of knowledge of Turkish, Persian, and Urdu because scholarly material on the Naqshbandiyya and Sirhindi continues to be published in these languages. The other reason revolves around the current fad of postmodern theorizing, particularly in the US. It is a lot easier to propound clever theories than learn the languages and read manuscripts. In spite of the current academic fads, Ahmad Sirhindi's works have a lot to offer us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century because human egos have not changed in the last five hundred years even though outer human circumstances have changed considerably. Scholars have a magnificent opportunity to bridge these two worlds, which is what I want to share with you today.

This paper proposes to expand the academic context of inquiry of Sufi phenomena by outlining possible meta-principles. Meta-principles either go beyond articulated Sufi principles or they go beyond the study of Sufism per se to potentially compare mysticisms across religious traditions. This latter point is easily

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forgotten as we work in our small disciplinary silos. For the first time in human history an amazing spectrum of mystical texts are available to anyone who can read. Meta-principles are a vehicle to engage Sirhindi's contributions with others who seek, across religious traditions, to live a God-centered life, without limiting the inquiry to the context of Sufism and Islam. Shaykh Sirhindi is challenging us as academics as he directly challenged the Sufis and jurists of his time. Articulating meta-principles in Sufism will not only put Ahmad Sirhindi on the 21<sup>st</sup>-century world stage, but will also assist in a better comprehension of Sufi experience and its applications. This is probably not a project that the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi would have endorsed in his time. On the other hand, explicating Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi's Sufi experience in a global context is a way of honoring what he took great pains to share. This is entirely appropriate for Mujaddid-i Alf-i Thani.

One set of meta-principles underlie the principles of Sufism articulated by Sufis themselves. I suspect that some of these meta-principles are so obvious to Sufis that Sufis do not bother articulating them, but in an academic environment things are not necessarily so obvious. For example, if Sufism (properly speaking *tasawwuf*) is the process of becoming a Sufi, then Sufi practice (behavioral and contemplative) is the primary context for studying and evaluating practicing Sufis. Note that not all people we label as Sufis were practicing and training students to the same extent as Sirhindi. Well known Sufis like Ibn al-'Arabi and 'Abdulghani Nabusuli come to mind because the apparent focus of their Sufi activity was not to train Sufi aspirants. In any case, all other contexts (like politics, culture, and literature) are secondary when compared to the primary activities of transformational experience. Without the depths of experiential realization there would not even be a history of Sufism just like there would not be a 1400+ year history of Islam without the Prophetic experience of Muhammad. The overwhelming bulk of academic scholarship on Sufism is on secondary phenomena of Sufism – which is valuable work. I am situating this scholarship in a larger context by articulating a meta-principle of Sufi experience that is too often forgotten.

### **What are principles and meta-principles in the practice and study of Sufism?**

In Sufi treatises often there are analyses of altered states of consciousness (*ahwal*), lists of various stations on the path (*maqams*), lists of Sufi shaykhs going back to Muhammad (*silsilas*), and sometimes ways to remember God (*dhikr*). These are some principles of Sufism that are well known. But there is more going

on when we start asking potentially difficult questions.

Take, for example, Baha'uddin Naqshband's dictum, "No one arrives anywhere on the basis of a *silsila* alone."<sup>1</sup> Can we ignore Sufi lineage when studying the Naqshbandiyya? Sirhindi took the lineage from Abu Bakr very seriously. When we examine altered states of consciousness, one does not have to be a Sufi aspirant to have an altered state of consciousness. Do we dismiss the necessity of needing a discipline of contemplative practice to facilitate altered states of non-ego awareness? Sirhindi's major role as a *mujaddid* was his incredible expansion of Naqshbandi contemplative practice. When we look closer at Sufi practices, what Sufi transformative practices are the most effective? Shah Kalimullah Chishti of Delhi commented on the great efficacy of Naqshbandi practices,<sup>2</sup> but the Shattaris may disagree – the name of their Sufi lineage declares the supposed quickness of their methods. How can scholars distinguish states of consciousness that transcend space-time-ego from those that are simply different from everyday waking consciousness? Sirhindi found it necessary to distinguish the *wujudis* from more advanced travelers on the Sufi path but what tools do we have as scholars to confirm his diagnosis (with live Sufis)? Is it possible to distinguish the stations of various living Sufis? With the proper academic infrastructure, we could study living Sufi practitioners and start to answer these questions. At least we could learn the appropriate questions to ask. I am sharing my methods of inquiry because it was by attempting to answer such kinds of questions that I started to arrive at a set of possible meta-principles.

In a very rudimentary way I attempted to address meta-principles in my first book *Sufi Heirs*. One important meta-principle, articulated by the Naqshbandis themselves, was the goal to connect to the Prophet like the Companions had done. One can say that the goal of *dhikr* practices was to transcend space-time-ego to emulate a state of consciousness that approached that of Muhammad. The *silsila*,

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1 Cited from Baha'uddin's *Qudsiyya* in Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 92 fn 31.

2 Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 28 where Shah Kalimullah Chishti (d. 1142/1729) says, "The people of Central Asia generally belong to the teaching of the Naqshbandi masters, and their way is the way of meditation. . . But today. . . the Naqshbandi path is very widespread. Since all the paths are found in you, why should you remain a stranger to the way of meditation? Train people in this way also, for by God! It is the shortest of paths. There is no doubt concerning the greatness of this order."

outlining the ritual of initiation (*bay'at*) between master and disciple, as modern Sufis have explained, is like an electricity line of *baraka* from Muhammad to the contemporary shaykh. When a Naqshbandi is disciplined to live a life of transformational practice and combines it with following of the Prophetic sunnat, the elements of practice, altered states, and *silsila* combine synergistically to bring one in close connection with the Prophet. Seen in this frame of reference, the major elements of Mujaddidi Sufi practice all have a clear logic.

There also are kinds of meta-principles that will help scholars investigate a larger context of Sufi phenomena. One meta-principle is the existence of stages of human development. This is a common principle in Sufism. Various Sufis have formulated a developmental schema of stations but only in a broad sense do these schema match each other. Nor do we have a typology of spiritual development involving these stations that can be practically used like the very well defined cognitive levels pioneered by Jean Piaget,<sup>1</sup> the ethical/moral developmental stages outlined by Lawrence Kohlberg,<sup>2</sup> or the stages of socio-emotional development of Erik Erikson.<sup>3</sup> Enacting this meta-principle with an experimentally verified developmental schema would allow comparisons of spiritual development across Sufi lineages and give a tool to measure the efficacy of Sufi practices. Transpersonal psychologists are trying to map out further reaches of spiritual development along similar lines but are hampered by many constraints, one of which is identifying the tiny percentage of people who are above average in spiritual development. Eventually such research could open the possibility of comparing Sufi activity with contemplative practices of other non-Sufi groups. For scholars of Ahmad Sirhindi it would be possible in theory to verify his claims about the people he calls *wujudis*, who are at the beginning of the beginning of the path but think they are advanced because of their egoic altered states of consciousness. Just like in Sirhindi's day, there is an abundance of contemporary activity with the label of Sufism that probably corresponds closely to 16<sup>th</sup>- century *wujudis*. To the best of my knowledge no one has attempted to investigate transformational activity in any Sufi group. This is an open frontier for future research.

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1 Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Growth of Logical Thinking from Childhood to Adolescence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

2 Lawrence Kohlberg, Charles Levine, and Alexandra Hewer, *Moral Stages: A Current Formulation and a Response to Critics : Contributions to Human Development* (Berlin: S. Karger Publications, 1984).

3 Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1993 [1950]).

Another principle elucidated by Ahmad Sirhindi is that living in accordance with the shariat is integral to Sufi practice. Again, Sirhindi has the *wujudis* in mind because apparently they thought that their exalted altered states of consciousness exempted them from normative Islamic practice. In an audience that understands that we are not talking about the superficial political notion of shariat but one that involves all three dimensions of the religion: *islam*, *iman*, and *ihsan* – this is an obvious point. But it is far from evident when we consider the many other spiritual paths in the world. It appears that many of those paths may not emphasize moral/interpersonal development in their practices.<sup>1</sup> In a 21<sup>st</sup> century academic context, this becomes a meta-principle of spiritual development. That is, the spiritual development quotient (SQ) may very well be the combined quotient of different dimensions of human development. Not only do we not know much about spiritual development, but we know less about the extent to which other types of development, e.g., emotional, cognitive, and interpersonal development, are related to overall spiritual development. Ironically many books purporting to discuss the role of interpersonal development in mysticism ignore Sufism when the intricacies of the master-student relationship and spiritual companionship (*suhbat*) would be the best example for them to make their argument!<sup>2</sup> These two examples demonstrate how Sirhindi's most basic principles of Sufism become meta-principles and a major contribution to the 21<sup>st</sup>-century study of mysticism in a global context.

The third example is articulating the principles and meta-principles of how spiritual practice develops over time. If the goal is becoming a complete person surrendered to God then the transformational practices developed by Sufis are, in modern parlance, psycho-spiritual technologies. That is, they are ways of using psychological, physical, and behavioral processes for the desired outcome. What we do know from the texts is that Naqshbandi contemplative practices changed over time. This was explicit in the development of the Naqshbandiyya into the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya and Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya. It appears that these practices became more complex over time, like in any other discipline of knowledge/technology. The question I ask is whether Naqshbandi practice is becoming less complex over

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1 See G. William Barnard and Jeffrey John Kripal, *Crossing boundaries: essays on the ethical status of mysticism* (New York: Seven Bridges, 2002). It is not certain that the knowledge of actual contemplative practices in this book warrant the conclusions of the authors.

2 See Jorge Ferrer, *Revisioning Transpersonal Theory: A Participatory Vision of Human Spirituality* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2001).

the last hundred years as fewer and fewer people are able to read about, much less experience, the states and stations mentioned in the *Maktubat*. I wonder how many shaykhs still teach the Sufi intricacies of this foundational text. Perhaps a much more pressing and important task for scholars is to preserve such knowledge for further generations and let the meta-principles take care of themselves later. Such an endeavor should also investigate contemporary Naqshbandi practices – perhaps effective transformational practices have been developed for the needs of modern students that do not utilize the intricacies of practice outlined in the *Maktubat*. I would add this project to the list of desiderata proposed by Professor Arif Naushahi for a new critical edition of the *Maktubat*. Practicing Naqshbandis will probably be using the *Maktubat* much more than academics.

### **A Brief Historical Synopsis of Modern Mujaddidi Practice**

There is no way to know if Sirhindi's system of contemplative exercises is still being practiced without doing field research. Scholars who spend extended time with practicing Sufis, few as they are, generally agree that changes in the modern world affect Sufi practice in ways paralleling other aspects of life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. These changes have yet to be documented. The changes occurring in contemplative practice between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the Panjab are indicated by “the rise of the mediating shaykh,” the subtitle of *Sufi Heirs*. What this means is that qualified directing shaykhs had been replaced very often with hereditary shaykhs. Given the uncompromising nature of Mujaddidi contemplative practice, it was not possible to fake the transmission of spiritual energy. So instead of being directing shaykhs, who literally trained seekers to progress along the path and *ordered* them to do things that would tame their egos, almost all Sufi succession became hereditary. This meant that there was a new generation of hereditary shaykhs who became mediating shaykhs soon after the turn of the century. These mediating shaykhs had no choice but to abandon the contemplative practices outlined in this chapter, along with the accompanying divine/spiritual energy. Instead seekers were required to harmonize their hearts to the shaykh, who then mediated for them with God (hence mediating shaykh). Instead of years of disciplined contemplative practice and effort dealing with one's ego-self, all one had to do is recite litanies of the Mujaddidi lineage going back to Muhammad.<sup>1</sup> With a mediatory shaykh seekers cultivated a love of the shaykh who then interceded with God on their behalf.

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1 Buehler, *Sufi Heirs*, 202.



The institutional expression of the directing shaykh was predicated on a particular worldview and specific political system. British colonial rule supported a modern-scientific worldview, a worldview that was propagated through English-medium schools to train cadres of Indian bureaucrats. Almost all traditional religious schools and Sufi lodges had closed by the turn of the century with the disappearance of Mughal patronage in 1858. Many Sufi shaykhs utilized the new print media and the British train network to become trans-Indian shaykhs. Changes in the socio-political realm affected contemplative practice directly. Not only were there fewer Sufi lodges but fewer people had the time to spend many hours a day doing contemplative practices pioneered three centuries earlier. In uncertain, changing times it was better that one's son was in charge of the Sufi lodge and adjacent buildings than the most spiritually qualified aspirant.

My colleagues have confirmed that Mujaddidi practices are still being done in Uzbekistan, Bengal, and Xinjiang. Both in Turkey and Afghanistan there are many practicing Mujaddidi groups, as there are in Indo-Pakistan. This activity is mirrored in the continued dissemination and the translation of Sirhindi's intricate manual of contemplative practice, the *Maktubat*. Some Mujaddidis are known publically like Shaykh Mahmud Effendi in Istanbul or Shaykh Azad Rasool (d. 2006) in Delhi, but Naqshbandis in many countries prefer to remain anonymous due to government pressure. Although the internet will provide hundreds, if not thousands, of Naqshbandi websites to those who are so inclined, typically Naqshbandis have preferred in their silent recollection of God to keep a low profile.

With the proselytization of the Ibn Arabi Society and the exemplary work of Michel Chodkiewicz and William Chittick, Ibn al-'Arabi (d. 1240) is relatively well known in the west. For all practical purposes, no one has heard of Ahmad Sirhindi. Ibn al-'Arabi is a towering figure in the history of Sufism, arguably *the* towering literary figure along with Jalaluddin Rumi.<sup>1</sup> What the afficianados of Ibn al-'Arabi do not emphasize is that his work, particularly Ibn al-'Arabi's magnum opus (out of hundreds of books), the *Meccan Revelations*, is for very advanced practitioners. Indeed, the level of this text is so advanced that I seriously wonder about the value of translations we have of Ibn 'Arabi into English or Persian.<sup>2</sup> The

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1 Arguably in terms of textual usage, the historically widespread use of Sirhindi's *Maktubat* in the eastern Sunni Islamic world is comparable to Rumi's *Mathnawi*.

2 "Translator's Preface: Disclaimers and Confessions" in Arthur F. Buehler, *Revealed Grace: The Juristic Sufism of Ahmad Sirhindi (1556-1624)* (Louisville, KY: 2011) discusses how I also

level of awareness of one who translates an Ibn al-‘Arabi or an Ahmad Sirhindi needs to correlate with the author to a great extent.

On the practical day-to-day level, Sirhindi’s main work, unlike that of Ibn al-‘Arabi, was teaching and supervising the teaching of a large number of disciples. Sirhindi pioneered a set of contemplative practices that have been transmitted to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His complete *Maktubat* has been translated into at least five languages. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s *Meccan Revelations*, on the other hand, has provided a map of Sufi experience and technical vocabulary used by subsequent Sufis (including Sirhindi) in addition to being a visionary compendium of human experience. It is unparalleled in Sufi literature. Yet for almost eight hundred years it has not been translated. Only recently has it been “translated” into Persian. It is not a manual for contemplative practice nor was it meant to be. As Sadruddin Qunawi, Ibn al-‘Arabi’s foremost disciple and interpreter (d. 1274), said in his last testament, “Ibn al-‘Arabi’s path ends with me.” The *Maktubat* is often a dialogue with Sirhindi seeking to provide wayfaring advice to specific individuals on the path. Sirhindi metaphorically seeks to help wayfarers get on the airplane and fly. *Meccan Revelations* is a glorious atlas of the visionary world of Sufism useful to wayfarers who have already been traveling on the airplane for awhile and seek to confirm their visions when they cannot ask their shaykh.

### **Bringing a larger context to the study of Mujaddidi contemplative practices**

With respect to placing Mujaddidi practice in a larger comparative framework, this is a fascinating topic that unfortunately requires considerably more data than is available at the present time. To get this data and to provide frameworks to compare this data will require researchers to actually cultivate the different kinds of consciousness states outlined in the texts. Any meaningful type of comparison at this point is mere armchair scholarship, akin to philosophers, who have never left their narrow rational-cognitive worlds, making questionable judgments of post-rational (=trans-rational) experience on the basis of (usually poorly translated) texts.<sup>1</sup> Points of comparison could start with the physiology of subtle bodies and

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wonder about my translations of Sirhindi’s Collected Letters.

1 For an extended conversation on this topic, see Arthur F. Buehler, “Researching Sufism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Expanding the Context of Inquiry,” in *The Continuum Companion Volume on Islam*, ed. by Clinton Bennett. London: Continuum, 2013, 93-118.

energy states. It is possible that *prana* and *qi* have much in common in their close relationship with the physical body just as *shaktipat* and *tawajjuh* (both defined as transmission of spiritual energy) may have similar frequencies in more subtle human bodies. *Shaktipat* apparently is the phenomenological equivalent in the Siddha yoga lineage to the Mujaddidi spiritual energy transmission outlined above.<sup>1</sup> Up until now no scholar has differentiated these two sets of energy phenomena. Indeed, these and many other phenomena are ignored in the academic study of religion. According to advanced martial artists, transmitting *qi* involves physical contact, while I can attest that *shaktipat* and *tawajjuh* operate without physical contact. All of these phenomena are energies (I do not know a better word) but apparently the latter pair has a “higher frequency” because they do not need physical contact. The point here is that scholars not only are clueless about these phenomena, but even more regrettably, they are blind to such phenomena.

It is shocking for me to witness the narrow context in which religious studies still operates in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since the 1980s it was expected that anthropologists read the texts of those they study but somehow this principle was not applied to those working with texts. The 19<sup>th</sup>-century Sufis I studied in *Sufi Heirs* could not be visited in 1990 but equivalent consciousness events, transmitted via the Mujaddidi lineage, could be witnessed. That is how I began my inquiry. Those who are not intimately acquainted with Indo-Muslim culture or Mujaddidi Sufi practices mostly assume that my *Sufi Heirs* is a textual study simply because that is the cover story for academia. The book utilizes almost a hundred sources previously unknown to western scholarship. But for those readers who *know*, interspersed in the text are allusions to very arcane points of Islamic or cultural practice. These points did not come from any book; they came from three years' immersion in Indo-Pakistani Muslim culture. The chapter devoted to Mujaddidi contemplative practice is almost completely ignored by my scholarly colleagues in their fourteen positive reviews of *Sufi Heirs*. It simply did not register. Yet when I talk to Mujaddidi Sufi shaykhs, some of whom ask their students to read that chapter on contemplative practice, they say that *Sufi Heirs* is the only work in English that they consider to accurately represent the Naqshbandiyya. This is because apparently I have accurately translated and contextualized the texts, not because of any

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1 Muller-Ortega, Paul E., “Shaktipat: The Initiatory Descent of Power,” in Douglas Brooks et. al. *Meditation Revolution: A History and Theology of the Siddha Yoga Lineage* (South Fallsburg, NY: Agama Press, 1997), 407-444.

special experiential knowledge as a result of altered states of consciousness. That translation and contextualization, however, was the result of closely working with practicing Sufis. My point is that those who work with contemplative texts need an expanded context of inquiry beyond books.

We know next to nothing of the phenomenology and realms discussed by Ahmad Sirhindi—do wayfarers visit other realms that “objectively” exist, or are they simply creating subtle “films” that reflect religio-cultural constructs? Are chakras and subtle centers heuristic devices for cultivating subtle bodies, or are they actual energy centers that are latent in all human bodies? If these issues are ever going to get seriously researched, then we scholars need to get out of our textual armchairs and personally interact with contemplatives, ideally exploring other realms of consciousness with them. This bleak situation of scholarly ignorance is not a coincidence. In the postmodern academy we are aware of ethnocentrism, the narrowness of cultural experience, but are hardly aware of our pervasive *cognocentrism*, the narrowness of conscious experience. Like color-blind people, those who have never experienced the non-ordinary conscious realities of Sufis do not realize how these psycho-spiritual realities can color the context of many Sufi texts and open entirely new areas of inquiry.