

ISSUES OF SPIRITUAL AND MORAL PERFECTION IN NAJMUDDIN KUBRA'S TEACHINGS

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Annotation. This article analyzes the contribution of the great Sufi master Najmuddin Kubra (1145–1221) to the development of Sufi thought on the basis of his treatise “Usul al-Ashara” (“The Ten Principles”). The study highlights the spiritual significance of each principle, their role in the process of human perfection, and the distinctive place of Najmuddin Kubra’s school in the history of Sufism. Through “Usul al-Ashara”, the inner laws of self-purification, the disciplining of the soul (nafs), and the attainment of stations of nearness to God are demonstrated. The article is devoted to a source-based and analytical exploration of these processes.

Keywords: Najmuddin Kubra, Usul al-Ashara, Sufism, spiritual training, purification of the soul, asceticism, contentment, meditation (muraqaba), Sufi tradition.

In his treatise “Usul al-Ashara” (“The Ten Principles”), Najmuddin Kubra elaborates on the ten fundamental bases of the Kubrawiyya order. These principles are: repentance (tawba), asceticism (zuhd), trust in God (tawakkul), contentment (qana‘at), seclusion (uzla), constant remembrance (zikr), spiritual attentiveness (tawajjuh), patience (sabr), meditation (muraqaba), and acceptance (rida). Numerous manuscript copies of this treatise, preserved under various titles, are found in libraries.

In this work, Najmuddin Kubra puts forward the well-known statement: “The paths leading to God are as numerous as the breaths of created beings”. This aphorism has been interpreted differently by various commentators. Its essential meaning, however, is that since every individual possesses unique traits and dispositions, his or her relationship with God is likewise distinct. This principle applies universally to all human beings. Yet, the Shaykh interprets the phrase in a more specific, initiatory context, classifying these paths into three primary categories: tariq al-akhyar (the path of the virtuous), tariq al-abrar (the path of the pious), and tariq al-shuṭṭar (the path of the true Sufis) [1].

The tariq al-akhyar is “the path of those devoted to worship and righteous deeds.” Travelers on this path engage extensively in outward acts of devotion such as fasting, prayer, Qur’an recitation, and pilgrimage. Through these practices, they seek to elevate their spiritual states and draw nearer to the Truth. However, the journey on this path is long and arduous, and only a few succeed in attaining the ultimate goal [1].

The tariq al-abrar is “the path of struggle and ascetic discipline”. Followers of this way strive to cultivate virtuous qualities, purify the heart, refine the inner self, and enliven their spiritual world. More seekers reach God through this path than through the previous one. Yet, their shortcoming lies in excessive preoccupation with discipline and struggle, which often causes them to lose sight of the ultimate aim – fana fillah (annihilation in God).

The ṭariq al-shuṭṭar is “the path of love, ecstasy, and divine passion”. It is the path of those whose sole aim is God, journeying towards Him in love. Those who embark upon this path reach, even at the beginning of their journey, spiritual stations higher than what others attain at the end of theirs [2].

According to Najmuddin Kubra, only those who are capable of envisioning “voluntary death” (i.e., renunciation of the ego-self) may enter this way. This principle is repeatedly emphasized in each of the ten foundations. The Shaykh describes this path as open and perfect, likening it elsewhere to the “art of alchemy”, which transmutes base metals into gold. For him, the entire path rests upon the ten principles: repentance, asceticism, trust in God, contentment, seclusion, constant remembrance, attentiveness, patience, meditation, and acceptance.

By the time of Najmuddin Kubra, various classifications of the stages of Sufi life or the process of sayr wa suluk (spiritual journey) had already been developed. These stages were usually presented under the title of “states and stations” (ahwal wa maqamat), and many Sufis showed great interest in this subject. Among these classifications, the most famous is the “tenfold classification”, known as Usul al-Ashara (“The Ten Principles”). This term refers to the ten most well-known stations out of more than a thousand described in Sufism. The spiritual ranks and levels established by Sufis of different periods were conceived as “stopping places” or “resting points” for travelers on the spiritual path [3].

In the history of Sufism, we first encounter this tenfold classification in Imam al-Ghazali. In his famous work Ihya’ ‘Ulum al-Din, the order is given as follows:

Repentance (tawba), patience and gratitude (sabr–shukr), fear and hope (khawf–raja), poverty and asceticism (faqr–zuhd), divine unity and trust (tawhid–tawakkul), love and longing (mahabba–shawq), intention, sincerity, and truthfulness (niyya–ikhlas–sidq), meditation and self-examination (muraqaba–muhasaba), contemplation (tafakkur), and remembrance of death (dhikr al-mawt).

Similarly, Suhrawardi, like Najmuddin Kubra, begins with repentance and concludes with acceptance (rida) in his tenfold order: repentance (tawba), scrupulousness (wara’), asceticism (zuhd), patience (sabr), poverty (faqr), gratitude (shukr), fear (khawf), hope (raja’), trust (tawakkul), and acceptance (rida).

Thus, along with Najmuddin Kubra, these two Sufi masters also played a significant role in the prominence of the Usul al-Ashara concept in Sufism. Moreover, it is observed that certain authors belonging to different Sufi orders also employed this “tenfold structure” in their works that explained Sufi concepts and principles [3].

Why did the Sufis consider this tenfold classification to be so important? Why did Shaykh Najmuddin Kubra adopt this very structure not only in Usul al-Ashara but also in other treatises? The Qur’an (Surat al-A’raf, 7:142) states:

“We appointed for Moses thirty nights and completed them with ten (more)”.

This verse alludes to the spiritual purification and striving for perfection of Prophet Moses (peace be upon him). Furthermore, in several hadiths, the number ten is repeatedly emphasized. All of these could have served as sources of inspiration for the Sufis. In addition, there were also practical reasons: the structure was easy to remember, simple to memorize, and convenient to transmit to disciples [4].

It becomes clear that the “Ten Principles” (Usul al-Ashara) put forward by Najmuddin Kubra were not chosen randomly. These principles are arranged in a specific order and are

interconnected. When followed systematically as structured by the master, they are observed to facilitate the spiritual journey.

Let us now briefly examine these ten principles, which were adopted as the methodology of the Kubrawiyya order:

1. Repentance (Tawba). In Sufism, repentance signifies abandoning sinful acts and returning to God. Sufis consider three conditions necessary for true repentance:

1. Genuine remorse for past sins,
2. Immediate abandonment of sinful acts,
3. Firm resolution never to return to them.

Najmuddin Kubra defines repentance as “the servant turning to God by his own will.” According to him, repentance is the very first step on the path and requires strong willpower. One must first repent for past sins to advance further.

2. Asceticism (Zuhd). Zuhd denotes renunciation, detachment from the world, and lack of desire for it. For Sufis, it means the complete elimination of attachment to worldly possessions. They classify zuhd into three levels:

The zuhd of common people: abstaining from what is unlawful or doubtful,

The zuhd of seekers: giving up superfluous and unnecessary things,

The zuhd of the elect: turning away from everything other than God.

Kubra states that the purpose of zuhd is to remain as indifferent to wealth, pleasures, rank, and status as a dead person would. Yet true zuhd goes further—it entails detachment not only from this world but also from excessive concern for the Hereafter, focusing solely on attaining the vision of God.

3. Trust in God (Tawakkul). Literally meaning reliance or delegation, tawakkul in Sufism is trusting in what is with God and severing hope in what people possess. Kubra defines it as: “Renouncing all means and strategies, like a lifeless body, relying only on God.” For him, the essence of tawakkul lies in the heart: perceiving God as the true cause behind everything. If this understanding does not permeate the heart, the ego (nafs) will mislead a person. True tawakkul brings divine blessing, sustenance, and protection.

4. Contentment (Qana‘a). Qana‘a means being satisfied with little and accepting destiny. According to Kubra, it is distancing oneself from all unnecessary desires, as though dead to them. He stresses avoiding extravagance in food, drink, and shelter. For the seeker, contentment attracts divine blessing and is closely linked to tawakkul: to be content with what exists is to be content with God Himself, the ultimate source of all.

5. Seclusion (Uzla). Seclusion signifies withdrawing from society and choosing solitude, not as the living but as though dead. Kubra considers uzla to be one of the essential principles of the path.

6. Constant Remembrance (Zikr). Zikr means forgetting everything other than God and continuously remembering and invoking His Name.

7. Turning to God (Tawajjuh). Literally “facing or turning”, tawajjuh in Sufism means directing the heart entirely toward God, purifying it from all images and distractions. In the Naqshbandi tradition, four types of tawajjuh are recognized: toward God, toward the heart, toward the master, and from the master toward the disciple. Kubra, however, emphasizes only turning to God, describing it as: “Turning away from everything other than God, as though lifeless, and directing oneself wholly toward Him”.

This stage demands complete renunciation of the ego and follows after dhikr. A true seeker at this point retains no desire or purpose except God. As Junayd al-Baghdadi remarked: “If a truthful one (siddiq) were to turn toward God for a thousand years, yet turn away from Him for a single moment, what he loses would exceed what he gained.”

8. Patience (Sabr). Linguistically meaning endurance and steadfastness, in Sufism sabr is restraining the ego, compelling it to obey God’s commands, and preparing the soul to endure trials. Qushayri mentions four types of patience:

1. Patience in acquiring what is sought by one’s will,
2. Patience regarding what occurs beyond one’s will,
3. Patience in fulfilling God’s commands,
4. Patience in avoiding prohibitions.

Kubra links sabr closely with zuhd, defining it as abstaining from pleasures through struggle, like the dead, thereby disciplining the ego toward higher virtues.

9. Vigilant Awareness (Muraqaba). Literally meaning watchfulness, in Sufism it signifies constant awareness that God is observing one’s state and heart. Kubra, however, also interprets it as “expecting divine grace.” He defines it as: “Abandoning all personal effort and entering a state of stillness like the dead, awaiting God’s mercy and blessings.” Through muraqaba, the seeker becomes absorbed in God’s love, relying on Him alone, until divine light (nur) descends upon him, purifying the ego instantly. Some Sufis describe this as jazba (divine attraction), whereby God draws the seeker to Himself without effort.

10. Acceptance (Rida). Literally meaning satisfaction or consent, in Sufism it is wholehearted acceptance of God’s decree. Hujwiri distinguishes two aspects: God’s acceptance of the servant, and the servant’s acceptance of God—the former preceding the latter.

In Kubra’s system, the spiritual journey that begins with repentance concludes with rida. This is surrender like that of the dead—renouncing one’s own desires and submitting fully to God’s eternal will. For such people, blessings and trials appear alike, for both come from the Beloved. This rank cannot be attained without perseverance in worship and obedience to God’s commands.

Conclusion.

Thus, a seeker who fully and successfully traverses this path is freed from vices, adorned with divine virtues, and attains the rank of the Perfect Human. Such a one has “died before dying”, annihilating the ego and awakening to true life. As Junayd al-Baghdadi said: “Sufism is that God causes you to die to yourself and live through Him”.

According to Najmuddin Kubra, such a person is granted the light of divine beauty, enabling him to perceive the states of others—an opening of the “eye of the heart”. In today’s context of moral weakness, intellectual crisis, and spiritual instability, Kubra’s teachings grow increasingly relevant. His Usul al-Ashara offers practical guidance for purifying the heart, strengthening social harmony, and cultivating personal responsibility. In particular, it provides a valuable framework for the spiritual and ethical upbringing of the younger generation. The legacy of Najmuddin Kubra is not only of historical significance but also serves as an inexhaustible source for spiritual renewal and the restoration of human values in contemporary society.



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