

The Perfect Being: Selections from a Sufi Manual by Nasafi

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Introduction

Like most biographical sketches of saints, prophets and poets, the exact details of the life of the 13th century Transoxanian mystical thinker, Aziz ibn Mohammad Nasafi, elude the modern scholar. Hailing from the city of Nasaf in present-day Uzbekistan, Nasafi belongs to the wealthy philosophical, religious and poetic tradition that emerged from the political turmoil of the medieval Islamic world. Though not renowned in the modern West as, for example, Rumi and Ghazali, Nasafi's impact has been profound in the Islamic world, notably in Sufi circles of 14th century India and 16th century Ottoman Turkey. The main source of his popularity is the simple manuals that he wrote for those engaged in the divine quest. His *Kitab al-Insan al-Kamil* or manual on *The Perfect Being*, from which the following selections are taken, stands as a prominent example. In addition to serving as an instructional guide for others, this work is also a personal journal of Nasafi's personal quest, often related in terms of his relationships with spiritual friends and teachers.

Broadly speaking, American and European audiences nowadays are engaged with two schools of Sufism: intellectual Sufism and Sufi poetry. Intellectual Sufism is represented by, for example, Ibn 'Arabi and Ghazali. Their gorgeous intellectually-focused expositions of Islamic metaphysics and epistemology have found a home in modern academia, in part due to their conversation and disputations with ancient Greek philosophy. In contrast, liberal arts circles have popularized and embraced Sufi poetry, especially those of, for example, Rumi and Attar, which they rightfully celebrate as part of an illustrious literary tradition.

Nevertheless, there remains an ironic tension between Sufism and its reception by English-speaking audiences. Sufism originates from

the Middle East and behind the ideas in *The Perfect Being* there is a cultural etiquette, which serves as a cradle that both holds and protects these ideas. Without embodying these cultural nuances, many of which are lacking in Western cultures, Sufi ideas can only serve superficial functions. Instead of aiding in spiritual transformation and guiding one to live a meaningful life, Sufism, following the popular trends of the West, has been largely relegated to the domains of narrow academia and sentimental art, often in forms that betray its authentic Islamic spirit. Academic philosophy has neutered Ghazali's violent attack on philosophy, and Western translations and interpretations of Rumi and Attar's poetry are increasingly aligned with liberal values rather than Quranic ideals.

The Perfect Being, however, defies academic and poetic interpretation. In these selections, drawn from its introductory treatise (*risala*) and five of its fourteen treatises¹, we find elegant expositions that are as traumatic

¹ Introductory Treatise: The Law, The Way and The Truth; On the Perfect Being; On Perfect Freedom; On Speech; On the Journey.

The First Treatise: On the Evolution of the Human Spirit; On the Number of Souls; On Advice.

The Second Treatise: On the Essence of Being; On the Community of Imitators; On the Community of Intellectuals; On the Community of Revelation; On the Community of Unity.

The Third Treatise: On the Three Groups of Man, On the Placement of Spirits; On the Soul's Fate; On God's Destiny; On Traversing the Path; On This and the Other Worlds.

The Fourth Treatise: On Creation and Resurrection; On the Lower World; On Resurrection; On Soul After Its Release from the Body; On Advice.

The Fifth Treatise: On Traversing the Path; On the Seeker; On the Attainment of Wisdom; On the Three Groups of People; On the Path to The Destination; On the Level of the Common Man; On the Conditions of the Journey; The Pillars of the Path; On Veils and Status; On Training.

The Sixth Treatise: On the Manners of Solitude; On Obedience and Disobedience; On the Conditions of the Forty Days' Training; On the Manners of Zikr; On the Ascent of the Sufis.

The Seventh Treatise: Introduction to Love; On the Levels of the Shadows of Love.

The Eighth Treatise: On the Ethical Code of the Sufis; On the Benefit of Traveling; On the Codes of Conduct in the *Khaneghab*; On Causing Another Dervish Sorrow; On Ecstatic Dancing; On Eating; On Asceticism and Discipline; On Speech.

The Ninth Treatise: On Maturity and Freedom; On the Freedom and Maturity of Man.

The Tenth Treatise: On the Greater World and the Lesser World; On the Action of God and the Action of God's Deputy; On Adam and Eve; On the Manifestation of Hell and Paradise.

The Eleventh Treatise: On the World, On the Physical, Heavenly and Intelligible Realms; On Advice.

The Twelfth Treatise: On the Nature of the Heavenly Realm; On Being, Non-being and Love.

The Thirteenth Treatise: On Unity; On the Night of Revelation.

The Fourteenth Treatise: On Heaven and Hell; On the Gates of Heaven and Hell; On the Stages of Heaven and Hell; On Adam and Eve.

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