

## **SOME EARLY DEFINITIONS OF TAŞAWWUF: EXPLORING THE CENTRALITY OF ABŪ YAZĪD AL-BIŞTĀMI IN ITS HISTORY**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this article is to present some early definitions of *taşawwuf*, uttered by a Sufi who lived before the end of the first half of the third/ninth century known by his paidonymic Abū Yazīd al-Biştāmī (161AH–234AH). The importance of this discussion – which employs the historical analytical method – stems from the fact that the definitions under study reflect a highly developed Sufi experience. The paper concludes that Abū Yazīd’s definitions are among the earliest known to us and that *taşawwuf* had reached its maturity well before the end of the first half of the third century AH. This would I feel prompt researchers in the field to reassess and reconstruct the history of *taşawwuf*, especially in its formative period, and might well lead to a new narrative of its development.

**Keywords:** *Tasawwuf*; Abū Yazid al-Bistami; *Ihsan*; Spiritual Journey.

### **Khulasah**

Tujuan makalah ini adalah untuk mengemukakan beberapa definisi awal tasawuf oleh seorang sufi yang hidup pada akhir separuh pertama abad ketiga / kesembilan yang dikenali secara umumnya dengan nama Abū Yazīd al-Biştāmī (161AH – 234AH). Kepentingan perbincangan ini - yang menggunakan

kaedah analisis sejarah - berasaskan fakta bahawa definisi yang dikaji ini mencerminkan pengalaman sufi yang sangat tinggi. Makalah ini menyimpulkan bahawa definisi paling awal yang sampai kepada kita adalah yang dikemukakan oleh Abū Yazīd dan tasawuf telah mencapai kematangannya sebelum akhir separuh pertama abad ketiga Hijrah. Penulis mencadangkan kepada para penyelidik di lapangan untuk menilai dan menyusun kembali sejarah tasawuf, terutama pada masa pembentukannya, dan dengan itu berkemungkinan akan membawa kita kepada satu naratif perkembangan tasawuf yang baru.

**Kata kunci:** Tasawuf; Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī; *Ihsān*; perjalanan spiritual.

## Introduction

There seems to be a general agreement among scholars of the Islamic intellectual and spiritual traditions that the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries have been the golden age of *taşawwuf*,<sup>1</sup> the Arabic name for the inner dimension of Islamic faith and practice. Modern scholars would call it the Mystical Dimension of Islam, Islamic Mysticism, or more popularly Sufism,<sup>2</sup> which seems to have gained a

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Harith bin Ramli, "The Rise of Early Sufism: A Survey of Recent Scholarship on its Social Dimensions," *History Compass* vol. 8(11) (2010), 1299–1315, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2010.00718.x>. This periodization is only in consideration of the historical development of *taşawwuf* as an organized movement. Otherwise, *Sufis* consider the prophetic time as the period, which manifests the highest embodiment of Islamic spiritual dimensions and see in the prophet himself the best example for themselves. This is exactly what the Qur'ān states when it introduces the messenger of God as "The Beautiful Model". The Qur'ān: 33/21.

<sup>2</sup> There is no problem with any term if it conveys the essence of the subject faithfully. My personal conviction is that the term Mysticism as the English equivalent to the Arabic *taşawwuf* is not justified. Mystical experience, while overlapping with some aspects of *Sufi* experience, is a phenomenon different from *taşawwuf* at least in its foundations, ultimate objectives and many aspects of its practices.

kind of general acceptance and has become popular among contemporary scholars of the field.

Ever since the disciples of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d 110/728) spread throughout the then Muslim world – especially in Basra and the surrounding areas – establishing centres of retreat,<sup>3</sup> the trend of distinguishably organized spiritual practices began to proliferate in the Muslim societies. Different names were used to identify

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There is a complete monograph in Arabic dedicated to the study of this issue. See, Dīn Muḥammad Muḥammad Mīrāshih, *al-Taşawwuf wa al-Misticizm: Dirāsātun Iştilāhiyyah*, with a foreword by Professor Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, Rector of al-Azhar (Cairo: Dār al-Quds, 2020). Many scholars in recent decades have raised concerns about the accuracy of the term mysticism when applied to *taşawwuf*. See for example Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1997), xvii; Eric Geoffroy, *Introduction to Sufism: The Inner Path of Islam*, trans. by Roger Gaetani (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2010), 2; Charles Le Gai Eaton, *Remembering God: Reflections on Islam* (Chicago: ABC International Group Inc., 2000), 209. Even in the Christian context, the term needs to be qualified as many Christian scholars see it. See for example, F. C. Happold, *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), 36. The term Sufism that has become almost the standard word in English for *taşawwuf* is not without its problems too; the least being the negative and unwarranted suffix that "ism" conveys. Islam does not consist of "isms" as Fazlur Rahman Ansari says. See his "The Islamic Spiritual Quest" (being a lecture delivered in Colombo-Sri Lanka) and published in 1978, by Moors' Islamic Cultural Home, in its *Souvenir no 111*, (1970-1976), 2; also see Carl Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, 1-19.

<sup>3</sup> One of the earliest known such centers is the *ribāṭ* (retreat center) in 'Abbādān (then an island close to Basra on the river Tigris) founded by disciples of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, perhaps by 'Abd al-Wāhid bin Zayd (150/767). See Ahmad Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 1. It is not easy to determine the location of the first such centre with absolute certainty. We have three major Muslim areas, Iraq, Khurāsān and Egypt, which were flourishing simultaneously and the accounts of the development of Sufi life in its earliest phase in each of these cities is yet to be studied and as such it will be difficult at the moment to say anything conclusive.

those who had chosen this way; *zuhhād* (ascetics), *fuqarā'* (people of spiritual poverty), *jū'īyyah* (hungerers) and many others.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the term *ṣūfī* (henceforth 'sufi') prevailed and the path itself was called *taṣawwuf*. It was logical then, that the science which deals with the details of the path, came to be called "The Science of *Taṣawwuf*" (*ʿIlm al-Taṣawwuf*), notwithstanding the fact that the term *faqr* and *faqīr* remained in use interchangeably with *taṣawwuf* and *ṣūfī*.<sup>5</sup>

There is no clear evidence to suggest that the terms *taṣawwuf* and *ṣūfī* were consciously chosen. However, the term has been in use from the beginning of the second century, and possibly, even from the last decades of the first century.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Other terms which had been in use and with which Sufis were known were, as Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī (d.380/990), a Sufi authority who wrote one of the earliest treatises on important aspects of *taṣawwuf* named *al-Ta'arruf li Madhhab Ahl al-Taṣawwuf* has mentioned, *Nūriyyah* (people of divine light) *Ghurabā'*, (strangers) *Sayyāhīn* (travelers) and *Shikaftiyyah* (cave dwellers). See his *al-Ta'arruf*, edited by 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd and Tāha 'Abd al-Bāqī Surūr (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyyah, 2004), 21-23; A. J. Arberry translated the book and published it under the title *The Doctrine of the Sufis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935).

<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that al-Muḥāsibī was using *Faqīr* instead of Sufi in his conversation with al-Junayd. See al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah* (Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 2017), 120. The great Sufi master Abū Madyan Shu'ayb bin al-Ḥusayn al-Anṣārī, popularly known as Abū Madyan al-Ghawth (594/1198) in his famous poem on *taṣawwuf* and *ṣūfiyyah* uses the term *Fuqarā'* – plural of *Faqīr* instead of *Ṣūfiyyah*. This poem has been celebrated by successive generations of Sufis; it was five-folded by Ibn 'Arabī (638/1240) and commented upon by another prominent Sufi, Ibn 'Aṭā'illāh of Alexandria (709/1309). See the original poem in Arabic, published by Vincent Cornell with an English translation, in Vincent Cornell (compiled and translated), *The Way of Abu Madyan* (Cambridge: The Islamic Text Society, 1996), 162-165.

<sup>6</sup> Historian and traditionalist al-Dhahabī quoting Abū Sa'īd al-A'rābī which is now lost *Ṭabaqāt al-Nussāk* says: "[al-Ḥasan's] teaching circle in the mosque [of Basra] would address *hadīth*, jurisprudence,

The North African Sufi scholar of the fifteenth century, Shaykh Aḥmad bin Zarrūq (d. 1493 CE) stated that there are nearly two thousand definitions for *ṭaṣawwuf*.<sup>7</sup> We have tens, if not hundreds of definitions, in

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Qur'anic sciences, language and all other sciences. Sometimes he would even be asked about Sufism and he would give answers. Some would accompany him to learn *ḥadīth*, some others to learn Qur'ān and still some others to learn Qur'ānic recitation, and some to learn Rhetoric. Others would accompany him to learn about *ikhhlāṣ* sincerity and the science of the elite (i.e. *ṭaṣawwuf*)." See Suleiman Ali Mourad, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110 H/728 CE) and the Formation of his Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship* (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2006), 84. The translation is Suleiman's with a few modifications by me. Abū Sa'īd al-A'rābī (d.952) was a great scholar of *ḥadīth*, a disciple of al-Junayd and a popular Sufi who wrote on Sufi topics. His works include, *Ṭabaqāt al-Nussāk*, *al-Ikhlāṣ wa 'ilm al-Bāṭin* and many others. It is clear from the title of the second book that he uses the term *ikhhlāṣ* to refer to *ṭaṣawwuf*. See al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī, *al-Luma' fī al-Ṭaṣawwuf* (Leiden: Brill, 1914), 22; Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah*, 100; al-Hajwerī *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, translated from the Persian origin to Arabic with an introduction, annotation and study by Is'ād 'Abd al-Hādī Qindīl (Cairo: al-Majlis al-A'lā li al-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1394/1974), 191-240. 'Abd al-Raḥmān bin Khaldūn, *al-Muqaddimah* (Lebanon: Dar Nobles, 2005), 513-516. Among other notable modern works, mention must be made to the following: Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Chicago: ABC International Group Inc. 1999); Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1997); Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1996); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976). I would also like to refer to the following modern works in Arabic: 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd's studies in *Ṭaṣawwuf* published with his edition of al-Ghazālī's, *al-Munqidh min al-Dalāl* (Cairo: Dar al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī, 1978), Muḥammad Kamāl Ibrahim Ja'far, *al-Ṭaṣawwuf: Tarīqan wa Tajribatan wa Madhhaban* (Alexandria: Dār al-Ma'rifa al-Jam'iyyah, 1980); 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Barakah, *Fī al-Ṭaṣawwuf wa al-Akhlāq* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā'ah al-Muḥammadiyya, 1980), Muḥammad Diyā' al-Kurdī, *Nash'at al-Ṭaṣawwuf al-Islāmī* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Jabalāwī, 1991).

<sup>7</sup> See Aḥmad Zarrūq al-Fāsī, *Qawā'id al-Ṭaṣawwuf*, ed. 'Uthmān al-Huwaymī (Beirut: Dār Wahy al-Qalam, 2004), 22. The book has

all classical sources of *ṭaṣawwuf*. We also have many unpublished manuscripts exclusively dedicated to definitions or collection of definitions of *ṭaṣawwuf* ascribed to classical Sufi masters such as al-Kharrāz (d. 286/899), al-Tustarī, (d.283/896) Abū Ya‘qūb al-Sūsī (circa 300/913) and others.<sup>8</sup> What strikes the observer here is that the majority of these definitions belong to Sufis from the second half of the third/ninth century onwards.

I have not come across definitions preceding the time of Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 234/847)<sup>9</sup> except the one,

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been published many times by different publishers throughout the Arab world, and has been translated to many Muslim Languages. A Turkish translation of the book was issued in 2011. See Sheikh Ahmad Zarruk, *Tasavvufun Esaslari*, Prof. Dr. Din Muhammad’s in Takdimiyle, Mutercim: Muhammet Uysal (Istanbul: Endulus Kitab, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> The manuscript is *Mi‘yār al-Ṭaṣawwuf*. Kastomonu, Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi, MSS 02713/7 (page 88b-133a).

<sup>9</sup> There are very few modern studies on Abū Yazīd in English. Although he has been held in very high esteem throughout the history of *ṭaṣawwuf*, very few serious studies have been produced about him. This might account for the academic fall back related to Abū Yazīd studies. Nevertheless, these few are highly significant. Most of them highlighting some aspects of Abū Yazīd’s experience. To the best of my knowledge, only a single and somewhat wholesome treatment of Abū Yazīd in English has been produced as a doctoral thesis titled “Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī: His Life and Doctrines” by Muḥammad ‘Abdu-r-Rabb, submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, McGill University, Montréal, January 1970. Other works on him include: R.C. Zaehner’s “Abū Yazīd of Bistam: A Turning Point in Islamic Mysticism”, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 1 (1957), 286-301; A.J. Arberry, “Bistamiyana”, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* XXV (1962), 28-37; A.J. Arberry, “A Bistami Legend”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1938), 89-91; Annabel Keeler, “Rūmī and Bāyazīd: Hagiographical moments in the Mathnawī- yi Ma’nawī,” *Mowlana Rumi Review*, vol. 8, 2017, 110-135; Binyamin Abrahamov, “Ibn al-‘Arabī and Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī,” *al-Qantara* XXXII (2) (Julio-Diciembre, 2011), 369-385. Arabic classical works on Abū Yazīd are very few. Nevertheless, all major classical Sufi Hagiographies together provide a reasonable collection of his sayings that could facilitate a good exploration of his

which is, ascribed to Bakr bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Muzanī (d. 108/726) a contemporary of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī. It is perhaps difficult to determine with absolute certainty, who provided the first definition of *ṭaṣawwuf*.

It is also inconceivable that for more than a century, from Bakr al-Muzanī to Abū Yazīd, no definition for *ṭaṣawwuf* had emerged. One cannot be indifferent to the fact that the first century of Islam and the second one in particular, must have had detailed and rich discussions on matters related to everything Islamic, including *ṭaṣawwuf*, without all these discussions finding their way to writing. We also cannot exclude the possibility of at least some endeavours to record them which either did not reach us and need to be discovered or have been lost forever. We know for certain, however, that serious discussions were taking place in many circles, most popularly in the circle of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, on matters related to *ṭaṣawwuf* in addition to theological and legal issues.<sup>10</sup> Could all these

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teachings. The only work in *sufī* classical literature that is exclusively dedicated to Abū Yazīd is the work of Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Sahlaḡī al-Biṣṭāmī (998/1084), known as *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī’s *Shataḡāt al-Ṣūfiyyah* (Kuwait: Wakālat al-Maṭbū‘āt, 1978). It contains the largest collection of his sayings with some very useful biographical information and deserves special mention. Two other classical works which cannot be ignored in any serious study of Abū Yazīd are Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī bin ‘Uṭhmān al-Hajwerī’s *Kashf al-Maḡjūb* and al-Sarrāḡ al-Ṭūsī’s *al-Luma’*. Other important works include al-Aṣḡahānī’s *Hilyat al-Awliyā’* and al-Qushayrī’s *al-Risālah*. The MA dissertation, submitted to Al-Azhar University in 1982, by Dīn Muḥammad Muḥammad Mīrāṣāḡib, entitled “Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī wa Naḡariyyatuhu fī al-Fana’”, is the first modern academic study on Abū Yazīd in Arabic. It tries to construct a complete biography of Abū Yazīd with a study of the spiritual state of *fanā’* in his experience. As for the name of Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī, henceforth, I will be using Abu Yazīd throughout this paper unless I am quoting from elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> Truly, the circle of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is reminiscent of the Academy that was established by the great philosopher of all time Plato (428-348). The impact of this circle on the trajectories of Islamic thought

discussions have taken place without defining the term *taşawwuf*? It seems to be highly unlikely.

This state of affairs does not seem to have changed even among the contemporaries of Abū Yazīd such as Rābi‘ah al-‘Adawiyyah (d. 185/801),<sup>11</sup> Shaqīq al-Balkhī (d. 194/810), Abū Sulaymān al-Dārānī (d. 215/830), Aḥmad bin Ḥarb (d. 234/847), al-Muḥāsibī (d. 243/858), Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d. 245/860), Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī (d. 245/860), just to mention a few. Except for Dhū al-Nūn and Abū Turāb, there is no trace of a definition from any of the remaining in the sources available to us.<sup>12</sup>

Dhū al-Nūn and Abū Turāb died in the same year, i.e. eleven years after Abū Yazīd. Both of them held Abū Yazīd in very high esteem. Dhū al-Nūn’s comments on Abū Yazīd in particular display the highest regard for him. We can infer from those comments,<sup>13</sup> that Abū Yazīd was

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has not been studied in its depth and comprehensiveness, to the best of my knowledge, and needs serious explorations. We just mentioned in footnote 6 about the discussions that were taking place in the circle of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī on matters related to *taşawwuf*. Biographical accounts of personalities of the early Islamic period provide ample proofs for many such circles.

<sup>11</sup> She was a senior contemporary of Abū Yazīd, who must have been in his twenties when she died.

<sup>12</sup> Some of those anonymous definitions quoted by classical Sufi literature preceded by the phrase “it is said” could possibly belong to one of these personalities or even to someone before them. They need further research and investigation in order to arrive at some conclusions in this regard.

<sup>13</sup> It has been reported about Dhū al-Nūn that a man came to him. Dhū al-Nūn asked him if he had a chance to meet Abū Yazīd. He answered in the positive and said ‘I asked him, “You are Abū Yazīd?” He answered by saying, “Who is Abū Yazīd? I wish I had seen him.”’ On hearing this, Dhū al-Nūn fell into tears, and then said “My brother! Abū Yazīd has lost himself in Allah’s love and begun to search for it with other searchers!” See al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Tayfūr*, in ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī’s *Shaṭaḥāt al-Şūfiyya*, 5. Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Aṭ‘ānī, *Rawdat al-Ḥubūr wa Ma’din al-Surūr fī Manāqib al-Junayd al-Baghḍādī wa Abī Yazīd Tayfūr*, ed.



considered by Dhū al-Nūn as a great embodiment of Sufi life, despite being contemporaries and equals in prominence. The same seems to be the case with Abū Turāb. His visit to Abū Yazīd has been documented by al-Sahlaǵī<sup>14</sup> and his high regard for Abū Yazīd is evident.

Another prominent and undisputed scholar of *ṭaṣawwuf* who needs to be considered is al-Muḥāsibī, al-Junayd's teacher. His strong participation in the intellectual movement of the third/ninth century has been sufficiently recorded. His works on Sufi approach to psychological issues and contemplative sciences, his extremely innovative treatment of the subject of understanding the Qur'ān and his discourse on the nature of reason remain living treasures of human civilization even today. If not for the negative attitude towards him from the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* of his time, including Ibn Ḥanbal himself, we would have seen his place in the history of development of Islamic thought differently. Despite all his contributions to the development of *ṭaṣawwuf*, he is not known to have left for us any specific definition of *ṭaṣawwuf* as far as my reading of his writings go.<sup>15</sup>

Taken chronologically, Abū Yazīd would be the first Sufi whom we encounter after Bakr al-Muzanī with respect to definitions. He will remain one of the greatest – if not the great – Sufis of the first period of *ṭaṣawwuf*

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Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Cairo: Dārat al-Karaz, 2004), 28; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī reports Dhū al-Nūn's comment differently: "Allah has some brides in the state of intimacy, no one will see them, neither here nor in the hereafter". See Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-Zamān*, in 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī's *Shaḥāḥāt al-Ṣūfiyya*, 211.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Sahlaǵī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 118.

<sup>15</sup> I consulted my colleague Gavin Picken – himself an expert on al-Muḥāsibī – who, emailed me on October 8, 2020, confirming my conclusion. For the general attitude of the *Ahl al-Ḥadīth* scholars towards al-Muḥāsibī, see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, n.d.), 8: 215. Also see Dīn Muḥammad, *al-Ṭaṣawwuf wa al-Misticizm* (Cairo: Dār al-Quds, 2020), 125-127.

before the middle of the third century. Thus, his definitions of *taṣawwuf* are, if not the earliest, certainly among the earliest. Surprisingly however, they were not given due recognition in the literary products of the Sufis who came after him, and they do not seem to have been taken seriously in the context of the history of the development of Sufi thought and practice.

Is it due to his living further away from the centre of the caliphate? Or due to his troublesome Sufi life and ecstatic utterances which prompted scholars and authors to possibly attempt to distance themselves from him and the likes especially in the midst of trials and antagonistic attitudes towards Sufis from different quarters?<sup>16</sup> Or is it for the reason that he did not leave behind any writing? Or is it that the writing on the science of *taṣawwuf* began in Baghdad during and after the time of Abū Yazīd and it needed some time for the focus to turn toward Khurāsān? Whatever the reason might be, this paper attempts to resurrect those definitions and bring them forward with the hope that they will contribute to a better understanding of the history of the development of *taṣawwuf* and of the pioneering role played by Abū Yazīd in that.

### **Importance of Abū Yazīd's Definitions**

Before embarking on the presentation of the definitions, it seems prudent to briefly discuss the logical question. Why it is important to take these definitions seriously? The answer lies in the following three factors:

Firstly, the importance of Abū Yazīd himself in the history of *taṣawwuf* and hence, in the development of

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<sup>16</sup> We know that the third century witnessed more than one trial of the distinguished Sufis. The famous trial of Sufis known in history as "Ghulām al-Khalīl Trial" because he was the cause behind this and Dhū al-Nūn's trial in which he was brought from Egypt in chains on charges of heresy speaks volumes of the story of antagonism against the Sufis. For Ghulām al-Khalīl see al-Hajwerī's *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 349.

Islamic thought in general. Secondly, the continuing relevance of the issue of definition to today's scholarly pursuit even as it was for yesterdays. Thirdly, the importance of what those definitions convey regarding the high level that Sufi experience had reached by the time of Abū Yazīd, which in turn helps us to understand better the history of the development of *ṭaṣawwuf*. In the lines to follow, we will briefly discuss each one of these three factors.

### 1) Importance of Abū Yazīd

As far as the importance of Abū Yazīd itself is concerned, it must be noted at the very outset that he belongs to the first phase of *ṭaṣawwuf*, which is its formative period. By "formative period", I do not wish to imply that *ṭaṣawwuf* is a later innovation effected by various external factors or imported from other religions<sup>17</sup>. Far from that; I firmly believe that the reality, which the term *ṭaṣawwuf* stands for, is an integral part of Islam. It was – at its highest level – originally referred to as *iḥsān*.<sup>18</sup> I also believe – in

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<sup>17</sup> This is what the majority of earlier orientalist and their European disciples had maintained for a considerable period until well into the last decades of the second half of the twentieth century. When results of reevaluation of these early theories begun to bear fruits and a new generation of Western Islamists emerged, possessing more original Sufi materials and having mastery over more than one Muslim language, a new and fresh appreciative treatment of *ṭaṣawwuf* emerged. Many new books and hundreds of essays have been produced in the last forty to fifty years, which have contributed positively to Sufi studies. For an overall picture of the situation see Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism* and Michael A. Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism: Sufi, Qur'an, Mi'raj, Poetic and Theological Writings*; Mark Sedgwick, *Sufism: The Essential* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005); Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Sufi Essays* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1972).

<sup>18</sup> As the famous *ḥadīth*, known as *Ḥadīth Gabriel*, explains. See for a detailed study of this *ḥadīth* and its implications, Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000).

conformity with what all Sufis have maintained – that there is no Islam without *ṭaṣawwuf*, or in other words, *ṭaṣawwuf* is the heart of Islam.<sup>19</sup>

What I mean by “formative period” then is, that this was the period in which the inner dimension of Islam was structured and organized, by detailing what will come to be known as the grammar of the heart<sup>20</sup> and the journey of the soul to God. This happened in conjunction with similar developments that were taking place in other areas of Islam such as *Fiqh* and *Kalām*.<sup>21</sup>

This formative period<sup>22</sup> is replete with treasures of wisdom that are yet to be unearthed. Most of the details concerning the lives and works of the pioneers of *ṭaṣawwuf* remain unexplored or require fresh investigations.<sup>23</sup> Undoubtedly, from the end of 19<sup>th</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> There is no serious scholar of Islam throughout Islam’s long history who has denied the truth of *ṭaṣawwuf* and its being the heart of the religion; they include Ibn Taymiyyah (d.1328), his disciple Ibn al-Qayyim (d.1350). It is only the Wahhābīs – who appear in different guises in different parts of the Muslim world – to adopt the attitude of absolute rejection of *ṭaṣawwuf*.

<sup>20</sup> This is in fact the name of a book written by al-Qushayrī, named *Naḥw al-Qulūb al-Kabīr* (The Great Grammar of the Heart), edited, annotated and studied by Basyūnī Ibrāhīm and Aḥmad ‘Alam al-Dīn (Cairo: Maktabat ‘Ālam al-Fikr, 1414/1994).

<sup>21</sup> For a profound description of these development and the emergence of *ṭaṣawwuf* as an independent science and Sufis as a distinguished group of people, see al-Sarrāj al-Tūsī’s *al-Luma’* 1-23 and Ibn Khaldūn’s, *al-Muqaddimah*, 513-516.

<sup>22</sup> I tend to prefer talking about the formative period by dividing it into two phases. Phase one from the beginning of the second to the middle of the third century, and phase two from the middle of the third century to the end of the fourth one. Explaining the rationale behind this division needs an independent essay, which I hope to complete shortly.

<sup>23</sup> Except perhaps for al-Muḥāsibī who has been studied with some detail in successive studies in the modern period. As we know, most of the prominent figures of this period have not left little if anything except for al-Muḥāsibī, who has literally been the scholar of the Sufis and produced some pioneering works on the Sufi path and its

century onward, there have been tremendous scholarly achievements in this area, mostly by western scholars that continues to this day. Nevertheless, the interpretative theories, which were employed to understand *taṣawwuf* historically and even phenomenologically and anthropologically, do not prove to be helpful.

Interest in looking not only for parallels, rather also for sources foreign to Islam, hindered the way towards a more balanced understanding of *taṣawwuf* and its history. Despite serious positive developments that have taken place in the area of Sufi studies, the need for exploration of the period from al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī to the middle of the third century begs attention.

One such area, which needs more research, is that which concerns Abū Yazīd, who, as we so far know, did not leave behind him any writing. Nor did any of his immediate disciples produce anything that contemporary scholarship is aware of, except for his younger contemporary al-Junayd.<sup>24</sup> All what Abū Yazīd has left were sayings, transmitted and disseminated by his disciples, companions and visitors during his lifetime itself. Some of these sayings, which were thought to be problematic, were studied and commented upon immediately after his death, by notable Sufī sages and scholars such as Abū al-Qāsim al-Junayd (298/910) and al-Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī<sup>25</sup>.

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ethics, psychology and on reason and revelation. His treaty on reason called *Mā'iyat al-'Aql* and the other work on understanding Qur'ān named *Fahm al-Qur'ān*, both of them are among the great intellectual achievements of the period. See al-Ḥārith bin Asad al-Muḥāsibī, *al-'Aql wa Fahm al-Qur'ān*, Ḥusayn al-Quwwatī (Beirut: Dār al-Kindī, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Fuad Sezgin has indicated that al-Junayd has been a disciple of Abū Yazīd. See his: *Ta'rīkh al-Turāth al-'Arabī*, trans. Muḥammad Fahmī Ḥijāzī (Cairo: al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyya al-'Āmmah, 1978), 2/454.

<sup>25</sup> Al-Junayd's work on Abū Yazīd, which is said to be a study and an interpretation of the ecstatic sayings of Abū Yazīd, has been lost.

We had to wait two centuries for Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Sahlaḡī al-Biṣṭāmī<sup>26</sup> (476/1083/4), a Bistamian scholar from Abū Yazīd’s tradition, and a great Sufi *shaykh* in his own right, to compile the first and only collection that has come to us, of the sayings of Abū Yazīd. His work contains more than 465 of his invaluable sayings, along with some precious biographical material about him, obtained from primary sources and through authentic chains of reporters. By the same time, we find all major sources of *ṭaṣawwuf* in Arabic and Persian incorporating many of Abū Yazīd’s sayings in their accounts of him, but very few of them in the context of definitions of *ṭaṣawwuf*.

An attentive reading of what has come down to us from Abū Yazīd’s sayings and from his immediate contemporaries and younger contemporaries, those who had seen him, encountered him and had discussions and correspondence with him, prompts me to believe that in terms of experience and practice, *ṭaṣawwuf* had reached its zenith in Abū Yazīd’s experience. If we closely follow the classical Sufī writings of the post Abū Yazīd period, which is dominated by stalwarts like al-Sarrī al-Saqāṭī (253/867), al-Junayd, al-Kharrāz Abū Sa‘īd (286/899), Abū al-Ḥusayn al-Nūrī (295/907), Muḥammad bin ‘Alī al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (295/905), and Sahl bin ‘Abd Allāh al-Tustarī (283/896), we encounter discussions, characterized by detailed analysis and typological classifications, of ideas and concepts, which are traceable to Abū Yazīd and expressed by him in words or through experience.

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Fortunately however, parts of it survive in al-Ṭūsī’s *al-Luma’*, with some valuable additions from al-Ṭūsī himself. See *al-Luma’*, 380-395.

<sup>26</sup> According to Ibn al-Athīr, he was the leader of the Sufis of his time in Biṣṭām. See the events of the year 475AH in Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī, (popularly known as Ibn al-Athīr), *al-Kāmil fī al-Tārīkh*, reviewed by Muḥammad Yūsuf al-Daqqāq (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1987), 8/428-429.

Many scholars of *taṣawwuf* might not agree with my reading of Abū Yazīd or with my approach to the history of *taṣawwuf*. However, I hope that the following points may help to justify my assessment of Abū Yazīd's central place and vital importance in the history of *taṣawwuf*, which have remained for the most part unnoticed hitherto.

(i) Abū Yazīd was born and lived during the period in which the third of the three dimensions of Islam was taking shape as an independent branch of Islamic sciences, as a social movement and a distinctive way life, under the new name "*taṣawwuf*" and "*ṣūfiyyah*" which had become by then popular and irreversibly settled. As such, his definitions of this emerging phenomenon (i.e. *taṣawwuf*), must be of special importance, in more than one way. They are definitely among the earliest definitions of *taṣawwuf*.

It is to be noted that most of the definitions that we read in the classical sources are post Abū Yazīd. They talk about spiritual experience in an unprecedented manner, where all dimensions of Sufi experience or Muslim contemplative life, whether they be external, internal, epistemological or related to Divine theophanies, were touched upon by Abū Yazīd in expressions which carry the depth of the experience. The beginning of the path, its states and stations (*al-maqāmāt wa al-aḥwāl*), glimpses of the nature of the experience, state of proximity and spiritual union, all are explained briefly, but deeply and comprehensively by him. This could be the reason behind what al-Hajwerī said of Abū Yazīd, "No one before him was able to achieve what he had discovered of the truths of this science."<sup>27</sup> Even the area of Sufi interpretation of the Qur'ān finds its promising start in Abū Yazīd's utterances.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Al-Hajwerī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 318.

<sup>28</sup> This field was initiated by his younger contemporary Sahl al-Tustarī to be further developed by al-Qushayrī and al-Sulamī.

(ii) He is the first among known Sufi sages from the early period to have talked of the "Spiritual *Mi'rāj*" (Ascension),<sup>29</sup> through which he presented an extraordinary description of the journey of the soul to God. Despite the sharp distinction in nature and objectives, it is reminiscent of what the sages of Markava Mysticism<sup>30</sup> talked about within the context of Judaism. In Muslim writings, this *mi'rāj* has been discussed in the context of self-annihilation and spiritual union.

According to some reports, his alleged claim of having a *mi'rāj*, similar to that of the prophet was the reason behind his expulsion from Bistām, his hometown.<sup>31</sup> Although it is not possible to think of the Sufi experience without some sort of *mi'rāj*, which certainly differs from one Sufi to another in its levels and manifestations, the important point here is that it is Abū Yazīd who provided a detailed account of such an experience for the first time in the recorded history of *ṭaṣawwuf*.

(iii) It will be appropriate at this point to mention another aspect of Abū Yazīd's importance, which is his contribution to Sufi lexicon. Through the expression of his above-mentioned *mi'rāj*, he introduces many highly

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<sup>29</sup> See al-Qushayrī, *Kitāb al-Mi'rāj*, edited and annotated by 'Āṣim Ibrāhīm al-Kayyālī (Beirut: Books Publishers, 2019).

<sup>30</sup> This experience, which is said to have been based on Ezekiel 1-13 and can be named as "visionary mysticism" is considered the first phase of Jewish mysticism. It flourished in the last centuries of the pre-Christian Era and the first few centuries of the Christian Era. Despite opposition from theologians, these visionaries used to be immersed in their world of experience and in their insistence upon reaching the Divine Throne although without success; this mystical trend would reappear later in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries CE among the Reign Kabbalists. For more details, see Gershom Sholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken Press, 1969) and Dan Cohn-Sherbok, *Jewish Mysticism: An Anthology* (Oxford: One World publications, 1995).

<sup>31</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr li al-Ṭibā'ah wa al-Nashr, 2001), 150.



sophisticated rich Sufi terminologies, which refer to different levels of spiritual truths. As far as my reading goes, these terminologies did not exist before him.<sup>32</sup> From the sayings collected by al-Sahlaḡī alone, I identified almost two hundred technical terms that profoundly refer to the high realms of the Sufi experience. We may add to that those found in the collection of al-Junayd and al-Sarrāḡ, as they are mentioned in al-Sarraḡ's *al-Luma'*.

This will help us appreciate Abū Yazīd's impact in the development of Sufi thought. This aspect of his Sufi personality alone talks volumes about the richness of his experience on the one hand and unveils the nature of the external and internal dimensions of spiritual encounter of Divine theophanies on the other. It is not only the introduction of so many terms to the Sufi lexicon, it is also the introduction and free use of – and with a lot of courage – a symbolic and allegorical language in *taṣawwuf*.

If attempts to interpret<sup>33</sup> Abū Yazīd by al-Junayd and al-Sarrāḡ bring to light the depth of his experience, they also demonstrate his ability to use the language as a channel to transmit the truths of transcendental experience, to those who would like to make sense of it. Yes, there were many Sufis in the post Abū Yazīd period – especially from the last decades of the third century onwards – who were using allegorical language to express the truths of the journey to God. However, we do not see any of them in pre-Abū Yazīd period. This will clearly

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<sup>32</sup> Arberry raises the possibility that these technical terms could have been a set of established Sufi vocabulary without providing any convincing proof. See his *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), 97. Keeping in mind that Abū Yazīd died in 234AH, it is very difficult to maintain Arberry's hypothesis.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Junayd's book of interpretation has been lost. A considerable portion of it however survives in al-Sarrāḡ's *al-Luma'* along with al-Sarrāḡ's interpretation, which included his rectifications of al-Junayd. See, *al-Luma'*, 380-395.

reaffirm the pioneering role played by Abū Yazīd in this regard. More particularly so, when we see in his sayings some early examples of the Sufī hermeneutics of the Qur'ān, which will flourish immediately after him at the hands of Sahl al-Tustarī and then al-Qushayrī, to be continued by many others throughout the Muslim history.

(iv) Connected to the above too is the identification of Abū Yazīd by scholars as the originator or the original exponent of the concept of *fanā'* in the history of *taṣawwuf*. Despite the fact that his younger contemporaries and those who followed, such as al-Kharrāz and al-Junayd, have written treaties on the issue of *fanā'*, it was Abū Yazīd who has been credited, and rightly so, for it and its connection to the verse of the Qur'ān known as the "verse of covenant". A glance at some of his sayings recorded by al-Sahlaḡī, al-Ṭūsī, al-Aṣfahānī and especially by al-Ṭūsī stand firmly in support of this.

Commenting on one of such saying of Abū Yazīd, which occupies in its English translation almost five pages of Arberry's *Revelation and Reason in Islam*, Arberry writes,

"This long text, which has only recently become available, is of capital importance not only as singularly interesting description of what was clearly a genuine experience, but also in its bearing on the later development of Sufi doctrine. Here, as so often, al-Biṣṡāmī was striving to give expression to his awareness of the annihilation of the subject-object relationship in the supreme mystical encounter; but he also seems to adumbrate a theory which afterwards acquired great value, the theory of the pre-eternal compact between God and Man

and its honouring in the mystic's interior life."<sup>34</sup>

It is worth pointing here that al-Hajwerī – himself a follower of a Junaydī Shaykh – considers Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz to be the first who talked about *fanā'* and *baqā'* and says, the whole teachings of his order which is called al-Kharrāziyya can be summarized in these two terms.<sup>35</sup> This is of course not the place for a detailed discussion of this issue. Suffice it to say in passing that, given the rich experience of Abū Yazīd which is the embodiment of the *fanā'* and *baqā'* in their highest stages, al-Hajwerī's statement should be taken to mean that al-Kharrāz was the first to present an organized treatment of the subject.

(v) Abū Yazīd also maintained a Sufī Centre<sup>36</sup> where seekers of spiritual transformation would gather from places as far as Armenia under his guidance. This Centre became a meeting place for contemporary Sufis and frequented<sup>37</sup> by many of them, sometimes with their

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Sarrāj, *al-Luma'*, 103.

<sup>35</sup> Al-Hajweri, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 480.

<sup>36</sup> See al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 112. We understand from what has been reported by him that the number of people who stayed at the centre was never less than one hundred, and that a rich individual of Bistām, called Ibrāhīm Mu'ādhān, volunteered to spend on those who dwell at the centre out of his love and respect for Abū Yazīd. It is reported of Abū Yazīd that he said: "God Has a friend named Ibrāhīm. We too have a friend called Ibrāhīm", and again, "there are people who came to us with the self, and some other with money and still some with Heart, but Ibrahim Mu'ādhān has come to us with all those three". Al-Sahlaḥī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 80.

<sup>37</sup> Among the known prominent contemporaries of Abū Yazīd are Aḥmad bin Khadraweh al-Balkhī, Fāṭima of Nishāpur (wife of Aḥmad al-Balkhī), Yaḥya bin Mu'ādh al-Rāzī (245/860) and Abū Turāb al-Nakhshabī (245/860). Dhū al-Nūn al-Miṣrī (d.245/860) had been in close contact with Abū Yazīd also. Although we do not have any record of Dhū al-Nūn's visit to Abū Yazīd, we nevertheless have records of correspondence between the two. In addition, we have records of Dhū al-Nūn sending gifts to Abū Yazīd and advising his

disciples.<sup>38</sup> There were some other prominent Sufis, who had disciples gathering around them. Evidently enough, they must have had centres of some sort. This possibility, however, does not downgrade the importance of Abū Yazīd's centre,<sup>39</sup> for the esteem he and his centre enjoyed among his contemporaries.

From the biographical notes that al-Sahlaḡī provides we know that this centre and the great gathering of the disciples there, has been among the reasons for the negative reaction of at least one of the local scholars against Abū Yazīd, which contributed – among many other reasons – to Abū Yazīd being either expelled from his town or forced to go on a self-exile.<sup>40</sup> The disciples who stayed at the centre, as well as the visitors, were provided with food and accommodation there. This was also called the House of the Righteous Ones or Bayt al-

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disciples to visit Abū Yazīd and bring his news to him. It seems from al-Hajwerī's writing that the centre of Abū Yazīd remained an object of pilgrimage even after his demise. See al-Hajwerī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, 266.

<sup>38</sup> It has been reported that Aḡmad bin Khadraweh al-Balkhī – one of the more frequent visitors to Abū Yazīd – once came to visit him with one thousand of his disciples. See al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 72.

<sup>39</sup> Al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 62, 66.

<sup>40</sup> Reports differ on this. Some say he has been expelled or went in exile seven times, some mention five times, and still others say many times, without giving any specific number. All, in any case, confirm the event. Many reasons are quoted for this: Abū Yazīd's criticism of the *Fuqahā*, *Muḡaddithīn* and *Mutakallimīn* and their methods of inquiry, his criticism of *Mutaqarri*' (originally Qur'ān reciters and by way of extension Shari'a scholars), his staunch defense of Sufi epistemology, and above all his claim of having had an experience like that of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). See Ibn al Jawzī, *Talbīs Iblīs* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Mutanabbī, n.d.), 316; Al-Dhababī, *Mizān al-ʿidāl*, ed. 'Alī Muḡammad al-Bīḡāwī (Cairo: Maṭba'at 'Īsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1963), 2/347; Al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 64. Also see Muḡammad Ghallāb, *al-Taṣawwuf al-Muqāran* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Nahḡa, n.d.), 53.

Abrār.<sup>41</sup> The information about this centre provided by al-Sahlaḡī is enough to convince any reader that this has been an active multi-faceted centre of activities that was well known and frequented by great Sufī masters and the seekers, from different parts of the Persian region in that early period of the history of *ṭaṣawwuf*.

(vi) Another significant aspect of Abū Yazīd's importance is that, the first formally known Sufī order (*Ṭarīqa*) in the history of *ṭaṣawwuf*, belonged to Abū Yazīd and it was known by the name of al-Ṭayfūrīyyah, after his real name Ṭayfur.<sup>42</sup> Al-Hajwerī considers "intoxication" as one of the characteristics that distinguishes this *ṭarīqah* of Abū Yazīd, especially from that of al-Junayd.<sup>43</sup>

Although he was a Junaydī as he himself states, he gave a reasonably good account of the Ṭayfūrīyyah order, and while praising it, was keen to warn the reader saying,

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<sup>41</sup> Ibn 'Arabī mentions this house with special reverence in his *al-Futūḡāt al-Makkiyyah*, 9 volume edition (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 2007), 1/126 and 270.

<sup>42</sup> See al-Hajwerī, *Kashf al-Maḡjūb*, 343 where he mentions the ten orthodox orders or groups of Sufis. Among their founders, there is none who is senior to Abū Yazīd, a fact that enables me to confirm that he was the first sage to introduce a *ṭarīqah* in the history of *ṭaṣawwuf*. The Naqshabandiyyah order is the present form of Abū Yazīd's *ṭarīqah*. For details see Muḡammad Amīn al-Kurdī, *al-Mawāḡib al-Sarmadiyyah fī Manāqib al-Sādah al-Naqshabandiyyah* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1321AH), 8-10.

<sup>43</sup> See Jawid A. Mojjadedī, "Getting Drunk with Abū Yazīd or Staying Sober with Junayd: The Creation of a Popular Typology of Sufism," *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies*, 66/1, 2003, 1-13; A.J. Arberry, *Aspects of Islamic Civilization as Depicted in the Original Texts* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1964), 218. This issue, in my opinion, requires a serious study and I have already commenced work on it. It might be useful to look at what Aḡmad al-Sirhandī, the great Naqshabandī sage at the turn of the second millennium of Islam – had to say about the relationship of intoxication with the Naqshabandiyyah. See his *Maktūbāt al-Imām al-Rabbānī*, Muḡammad Murād al-Minzāwī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Ilmiyyah, n.d.) 1/340-341.

"it is not easy to follow".<sup>44</sup> Naqshabandī historians consider their *ṭarīqah*, which was reformed by the fourteenth century Central Asian sufi master Bahā' al-Dīn Naqshaband (1318-1389) and known as "al-Naqshabandiyyah", to be the continuation of Tayfuriyyah. Although this *ṭarīqah* was known by different names in different periods of its history, the name Naqshabandī survived globally from the time of Bahā' al-Dīn.<sup>45</sup>

(vii) Abū Yazīd's effort in consolidating "Sufi epistemology" by his tireless defense of it against those who rejected or undervalued it is another of his leading contribution to *taşawwuf* as well as to Islamic thought and philosophy. The intellectual climate of Abū Yazīd's time was pregnant with an attitude of indifference toward the Sufi concept of knowledge in which *kashf* (intuition) enjoyed a very high place. As for many others who are non-Sufis, they found it problematic and to them it seemed to transgress the borders of reason. At least this is how many scholars in different fields of Islamic sciences saw it. Where the successful debate that Abū Yazīd had with one of the legal scholars of his area regarding "intuitive knowledge" demonstrated his solid foundation in Islamic

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<sup>44</sup> Al-Hajwerī, *Kashf al-Maḥjūb*, 418.

<sup>45</sup> See Husayn bin 'Alī al-Kāshifī, *Rashaḥāt 'Ayn al-Hayāt* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.) 10. Al-Mujaddidiyyah and Khālidiyyah are some other names by which the *ṭarīqah* was known after Bahā' al-Dīn. See Muḥammad Amīn al-Kurdī in his *al-Mawāhib al-Sarmadiyyah fī Manāqib al-Sādah al-Naqshabandiyyah* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1321 AH), 8-9, where he says after introducing the *silsilah*, "the title of the *silsilah* differs with the difference of the time (centuries). From the time of Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq to Tayfūr al-Biṣṭāmī it is known as Ṣiddīqiyyah, from Tayfūr al-Biṣṭāmī to 'Abd al-Khāliq al-Ghujdawānī it was known as Ṭayfuriyyah, from al-Ghujdawānī to Bahā' al-Dīn it was called Khwājākāniyyah (*Khuwājgān* in Persian), from him to 'Ubayd Allāh Aḥrār it was called Naqshabandiyyah, from Aḥrār to Aḥmad al-Sirhandī it was called Aḥrāriyyah, from al-Sirhandī to Shaykh Khālīd it was called Mujaddidiyyah and from Shaykh Khālīd to our time it is called Khālidiyyah.

sciences and his debating skills, the arguments against this type of knowledge put forward by his opponent vividly exhibited the antagonistic<sup>46</sup> atmosphere under which Sufi epistemology had to survive.

The essence of his defence of *kashf*, transcended the limited historical contexts to live forever in the memory of the Sufis and their literature. The famous expression of Abū Yazīd, "You take your knowledge dead from the dead, but we take our knowledge from the Alive who does not die"<sup>47</sup> has become a mantra for later Sufis. Ibn 'Arabī (638/1240) who, internalizes the spirit of Abū Yazīd and defends *kashf* with new vigour, repeatedly quotes Abū Yazīd's above mentioned saying in several places in his *Futūḥāt* and many other works.

(viii) Abū Yazīd's stand against the extreme legalism of the *fuqahā'* and exaggerated involvement of human reason in the areas of Divine mysteries, the world of the unseen, might be the first of its kind from the Sufi perspective. He courageously put forward this perspective in a competing intellectual milieu. He is known to be very outspoken among the early Sufis and reacted strongly and openly against the approach to religion that compromises

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<sup>46</sup> There is no doubt that there were people claiming to be Sufis while misinterpreting intuition as a source of knowledge. Instead of maintaining the balance of sources by giving each one its due place without any transgression some who in the name of *taṣawwuf* devalued the scriptural knowledge and another some who in favour of scriptural external knowledge denied or devalued the inward knowledge or the intuitive one *kashf* (unveiling). The real Sufi position was between the two. Neither negligence nor excesses were tolerated by the Sufis. Until now there are over-generalizations that see 'Ulamā' and Sufis as two opposing poles always – in tension and distort the positions of both.

<sup>47</sup> See William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabī's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 249. Al-Sahlaḥjī's reporting of the wording is slightly different, but does not change its implications. See al-Sahlaḥjī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 100.

its "spiritual dimension". Any religious discourse that does not exhibit the spirit of "feeling of Divine presence" was unacceptable to him.

He was once questioned by the *imām* of a local mosque about his source of income. Apparently, the *imām* was unhappy with Abū Yazīd's style of living. Therefore, he categorically asked him, "Where do you eat from?" Abū Yazīd's immediate answer was "Hold on, until I repeat my prayer which I performed behind you. For it is not permitted to pray behind someone who does not know the Nourisher (*Rāziq*)."<sup>48</sup> He also expressed his dissatisfaction with the theologian's discussions of issues of Divine realities. He said, "Disagreement of the scholars is a mercy save in abstracting God's unity *tajrīd*<sup>49</sup> *al-tawḥīd*. He believed that "anyone who wants to discuss matters of Divine realities (*man takallam fī al-azal* – affairs of the eternity) needs to possess the light of the eternity."<sup>50</sup>

It is clear that he was confident of possessing that light, for it would be difficult to explain his indulgence in the hermeneutics of Divine essence and its mysteries. We have enough of his sayings to suggest that, he pioneered a distinguished new approach to theological issues.<sup>51</sup> In the period between the last decades of the second and the early decades of the third century Hijrī, Abū Yazīd, and some other prominent Sufis such as al-Muḥāsibī and Dhū al-Nūn, just to name a few, had introduced many rich foundational concepts and principles of Sufi perspectives to theology, spirituality and *fiqh*.

(ix) In addition to all these considerations, which we briefly mentioned above, there is the aspect of the unique

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<sup>48</sup> Al-Sahlaǵī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 148.

<sup>49</sup> The term *tajrīd* in Sufi usage has different shades of meanings pointing to multiple levels of intellectual perspectives and spiritual states, which cannot be dealt with here.

<sup>50</sup> Al-Sahlaǵī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 145 and 165.

<sup>51</sup> See for example al-Sahlaǵī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 145-147.



status and high regard in which he was held by his contemporaries and those who came after him. Let us take two examples: Dhū al-Nūn and al-Junayd. Dhū al-Nūn, who died twelve years after Abū Yazīd had maintained very close contacts with him.<sup>52</sup> Commenting on one of the responses of Abū Yazīd to Dhū al-Nūn's letter, he said, "this is something beyond our states" (*hādha kalāmun la tabluḡhu aḥwāluna*).<sup>53</sup> On another occasion, he said of Abū Yazīd, "my brother Abū Yazīd has lost his self in the love of God and started seeking for it with the seekers."<sup>54</sup>

As for al-Junayd al-Baḡhdādī, who is very often juxtaposed against Abū Yazīd by historians of *ṭaṣawwuf*, he held him in such high regard in which no other Sufi, contemporaries or forbearers, were held. He categorically said "Abū Yazīd among us is like Jibrīl among angels"<sup>55</sup> and "all are practicing in their fields, once they reach Abū Yazīd's field they become amblers."<sup>56</sup> Commenting on Abū Yazīd's Sufi expression, Junayd says the depth that characterizes Abū Yazīd's sayings are witness to the fact that he had drunk from a sea that was created exclusively for him.<sup>57</sup>

In general, classical Sufi biographical (*ṭabaqāt*) and hagiographical authors, from the fourth and fifth centuries, agree on the pioneering position of Abū Yazīd in *ṭaṣawwuf*.<sup>58</sup> When we come to Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī, the

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<sup>52</sup> Both of them performed *ḥajj* together and they had exchanged correspondences. Reports recorded by al-Sahlaḡī and others witness to a very close contact between the two.

<sup>53</sup> Sibṭ bin al-Jawzī, *Mir'āt al-Zamān*, 211.

<sup>54</sup> Al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 94.

<sup>55</sup> Al-Hajweri, *Kashf al-Maḡjūb*, 317.

<sup>56</sup> Al-Sahlaḡī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 184.

<sup>57</sup> Al-Ṭūsī, *al-Luma'*, 381.

<sup>58</sup> See for example Muḡammad 'Abd al-Raḡmān al-Sulamī (412/1021), *Ṭabaqāt al-Ṣūfiyyah*, Nūr al-Dīn Shurayba (ed.) (Cairo: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1953), 67; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah*, eds. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḡmūd and Maḡmūd bin al-Sharīf (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Ḥadīth,

two poles of *taşawwuf* in its later history, we find these two great masters displaying great admiration for Abū Yazīd in a way that makes him unparalleled in the entire Sufi history. No Sufi personality was quoted by Ibn ‘Arabī more than Abū Yazīd.<sup>59</sup> As for Rūmī, he does not differ from what Ibn ‘Arabī holds, save the language he uses.<sup>60</sup>

With all this acknowledgement of Abū Yazīd as a central figure in the history of *taşawwuf*, his real contributions have not been studied and acknowledged, as they, should have been. His treatment in modern studies as well as in classical Sufi sources does not do justice – in my opinion – to his actual importance.

One of the reasons for this could be, in my opinion, the non-availability of materials produced by Abū Yazīd or any of his disciples in the form of books, monograph or epistles. Even when the Egyptian scholar, ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī edited and published al-Sahlaǵī’s manuscript which constituted the largest collection of Abū Yazīd’s sayings with some vital biographical information, no serious attempts were made in the academic circles to present Abū Yazīd’s thought and study of his experience

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n.d.), 1/77. Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣfahānī (430/1038), *Hilyat al-Awliyā’* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1980), 10/34.

<sup>59</sup> I personally surveyed quotes of Abū Yazīd in *al-Futuḥāt al-Makkiyah* of Ibn ‘Arabī. I found him mentioning Abū Yazīd and mostly quoting around 138 times. I got hold of a new edition of the book (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir) in 9 vols. which includes indices. Unfortunately, when I started following Abū Yazīd through the index I found it inaccurate and as such unreliable; in some pages mentioned in the index Abū Yazīd’s name does not appear at all. Binyamin Abrahamov’s *Ibn al-‘Arabī and Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī* explores Ibn ‘Arabī’s assessment of Abū Yazīd comprehensively. Although I differ with some of his readings, it is a useful work in this regard. It was however surprising that Abrahamov considered the above mentioned index reliable.

<sup>60</sup> See Annabel Keeler, “Rūmī and Bāyazīd: Hagiographical moments in the Mathnawī- yi Ma’nawī” *Movlana Rumi Review*, vol. 8 (2017), 110-135.

with an endeavour to assess his contribution to Sufi thought and history.<sup>61</sup>

The other reason which could have played a crucial role in the lack of proper assessment and appreciation of Abū Yazīd is the wrong dating of his life. While his death took place in 234/847,<sup>62</sup> most of the sources record 261 or 264 as the more acceptable date. These two dates are unthinkable, on the basis of circumstantial evidence that I have spelled out in my study in Arabic.<sup>63</sup> An unchecked acceptance of Abū Yazīd's death in 261 or 264 has made scholars naturally push Abū Yazīd back in history by more than thirty years. This in turn has hindered them from a proper identification of the contribution he made.

Now, when we take a serious note of his death in 234, we will be able to make sense of what was said about him as "being among the early leaders of the Sufis,"<sup>64</sup> and to understand al-Junayd's statement which makes Abū

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<sup>61</sup> The first serious attempt to study Abū Yazīd in English could be the Ph.D thesis, by Muḥammad 'Abdu-r-Rabb, submitted to the Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, Montreal, in 1970. In Arabic language it is perhaps my M.A. thesis, submitted to the Faculty of Usuluddin of Al-Azhar University, Cairo in 1982. In fact, when I was submitting my thesis at al-Azhar I was not aware of Muḥammad 'Abdu-r-Rabb's work. Communication means had not developed the way we have them today. Since we both have used almost the same material that is al-Sahlaḥī, our conclusions are quite similar in several respects. However, there are many essays covering different aspects of Abū Yazīd's *taṣawwuf*. Scholars such as Nicholson, Arberry, Zaehner, Ritter – to mention a few – feature prominently among them. They certainly enrich Abū Yazīd's study and open many avenues for researchers.

<sup>62</sup> This is the date I arrived at based on textual and circumstantial evidences. I was pleased to see Muḥammad 'Abdu-r-Rabb had also arrived at the same conclusion based on almost the same evidences.

<sup>63</sup> See Dīn Muḥammad Muḥammad Mīrāṣāḥīb, "Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī wa Nazariyyatuhu fī al-Fanā", 1982, al-Azhar University, 146; also Muḥammad 'Abdu-r-Rabb, "Abū Yazīd al-Biṣṭāmī: His Life and Doctrines", McGill University, 1970, 47-48.

<sup>64</sup> 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Tā'rikh al-Ṣūfīyyah*, ed. Muḥammad Adīb al-Jādīr (Damascus: Dār Ninawa, 2015), 189.

Yazīd like Jibrīl among angels. Had this been in the minds of the scholars they certainly would have treated him differently as a man who played a foundational role in the formation and development of *taşawwuf* as a science and practice.

## **2) Relevance of the Issue of Definition for Today**

As for the relevance of the topic to our time, I am fairly convinced that the discussion of definitions of *taşawwuf* is still very much alive. Despite hundreds of papers and books, which have been published in many world languages, from the eighteenth century when modern interest in Sufi studies began, the discussion on the nature of *taşawwuf* didn't seize to attract, and naturally so, the scholars' attention.

An accurate understanding of the development of the history of *taşawwuf* depends on – along with other factors – a proper understanding of the concept. Continuing discussions about the appropriate method for studying *taşawwuf* cannot reach any meaningful conclusion until a clear understanding of the concept is reached. Emergence of new spiritualities in our world today has added more to the already existing confusion regarding *taşawwuf*.

Contemporary man finds himself caught between competing spiritualities, unable to distinguish between the authentic form and its pseudo manifestations. In this context, it is only appropriate, to look at these classical definitions, which are not only belonging to the earlier period of *taşawwuf*, but also coming from a man who occupies a central place in shaping its authentic form and the development of its theory and practice, and whose centrality to *taşawwuf* and the originality of his ideas have never been contested. On the contrary, he has been seen as rightly stated by Zaehner a "turning point in its history."<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> This is the title of Zaehner's essay with slight change and in a different context. See R. C. Zaehner, "Abū Yazīd of Bistām: A Turning Point in Islamic Mysticism", *Indo-Iranian Journal*, vol. 1,

Moreover, the relevance of these definitions can be further augmented through the fact that they contribute constructively in correcting many ideas mostly propagated by Western scholars regarding the origins of *taşawwuf* and its development.

### 3) Exploring Abū Yazīd's Definitions

*Taşawwuf* has been defined in various ways by different Sufis throughout its history. None of them apparently meets the logical demands of being clear, cognitive and comprehensive. This will not surprise anyone. By nature, and unlike any other branch of knowledge, *taşawwuf*, first and foremost, is a practice, it is a wayfaring. It has an aspect of *mujāhadah*, which is observable in many of its external manifestations. This can be detailed and explained. Nevertheless, *taşawwuf* is also an inner experience that can only be partially comprehended and only by a practitioner, and this is the aspect that is usually meant when talking about *taşawwuf* in its deeper meaning and reality. It is not an inner experience of something outwardly observable; rather, it is an experience of transcendental realities concerning spirit (*rūḥ*), soul (*nafs*), angelic world and the Divine theophanies.

Since this inward experience in its advanced stages, takes place in a very passive state on the part of the experiencing Sufi, it will not be possible to think of the probability of having a complete comprehension of what takes place. When the experiencer is overwhelmed by the experience and he falls captive to the state of annihilation and its multi-faceted manifestations, it becomes

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no. 4 (1957), 286-301. Prof Zaehner considers Abū Yazīd a turning point in the context of introducing Indian Vedanta into *taşawwuf*. This is a thesis that was long debated between him and Arberry and many scholars seemed to be convinced by Arberry's stance on this. Although I do not share Zaehner's understanding and interpretation, I take his point that "Abū Yazīd is a turning point in *taşawwuf*" as a true assessment of Abū Yazīd's contribution to *taşawwuf*.

impossible to have a full grasp of the experience in its different dimensions. This is a different type of knowing where the knower becomes annihilated in the known.

It is a spiritual realization which is read in the likes of Abū Yazīd's words such as "He said to me "Thou art thou!" I said, "I am I." If I had been I in respect of I, I would not have said I; so since I was never I, be Thou Thou!"<sup>66</sup> It cannot be otherwise. Just ponder on the definition of *iḥsān*, as expressed in the prophetic tradition famously known as *Ḥadīth Jibrīl*, which says, "It is to worship Allah as if you are seeing him. And if you don't see Him, He is seeing you". Is it possible for anyone to have a sense of this experience of being as seeing Him? This is the reality behind what the Sufis said about *taṣawwuf* as "being perplexed at the door of God."<sup>67</sup> It will not be of any surprise then to see Sufi sages introducing *taṣawwuf* in different ways. Every one of them is trying to present it in the light of his own experience, which is limited – and must be limited – in its cognitive aspect.

It is impossible, however, to talk about a science of *taṣawwuf* and to have an intellectual debate about it without having defined it first. Earlier Sufis were aware of this dilemma and tried their best to define it in a way that could help those outsiders to have some sense of what it was all about. Looking at those definitions recorded in classical Sufi literature, we can see two aspects of the path. First is the one that concerns "initial steps" and "practical conducts" which the novice can be taught, guided to and supervised by the spiritual master; and the second is the deeper level of experiencing the ascending

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<sup>66</sup> See the text in its English rendering fully in A.J. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1965), 99-103.

<sup>67</sup> Interestingly this happens to be one of the definitions of *taṣawwuf* by Abū Yazīd. Similar to this is what Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣfahānī has said, that *taṣawwuf* is "suffering the anxiety in order to maintain the connection or attachment (to the Divine)."

of the soul and the theophanies of the proximity to God. The first level can obviously be defined, and the second can only be introduced partly or partially.

When Sufis defined *taşawwuf*, keeping the first level in mind, they more or less agreed on the subject matter and the objectives, and it is usually in general terms. The only difference would be in the wordings. When they define it keeping the second level in mind, we find ourselves in front of many descriptions. Those familiar with the path will be able to read the underlying truths and appreciate the meaning of the famous phrase "all are pointing to that beauty." Nevertheless, many outsiders and observers will be perplexed.

Now, turning to Abū Yazīd to look at what he said in defining *taşawwuf*, we find those sayings exhibiting the highest stages of the path and touching in profound depth all characteristics that accompany those stages to the maximum that human ability can go in grasping, comprehending and expressing. I was able to enumerate from different Sufi classics – published and manuscripts – thirteen definitions aimed at explaining the nature of *taşawwuf* and Sufi. They are:

1. *Taşawwuf* is the tying of the rope (around the waist to bear extreme hunger) and blocking the corpse (allegorically meaning obstructing the desires of the body).<sup>68</sup>
2. *Taşawwuf* is hurling the self in His slavery, attaching the heart to His Lordship, practicing all exalted virtues and beholding Allah in totality.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> "Al-*Taşawwuf shadd al-arfāq wa şadd al-awrāq*." Al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 83. The explanation in brackets was given by 'Abd al-Rahmān Badawī in his *Şaṭaḥāt al-Sufiyyah*, 83.

<sup>69</sup> "Al-*Taşawwuf tarḥ al-nafs fī al-'ubūdiyyah wa ta'aluq al-qalb bi al-rubūbiyyah wa isti'māl kullī khuluq saniyy wa al-naẓar ila Allāh bi al-kulliyah*." Al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 138.

3. *Taşawwuf* is loyalty without covenant, earnestness without affectation and secrecy without expression.<sup>70</sup>
4. *Taşawwuf* is an illuminating light that was caught by the eyes (of the heart) and then absorbed.<sup>71</sup>
5. *Taşawwuf* is an attribute of the *Haqq* (Truth) assumed by the slave.<sup>72</sup>
6. *Taşawwuf* is being perplexed at the door of God while abandoning creatures. Haven't you seen what Allah says: "So flee unto God (al-*Aḥqāf* 46:9)" and "Turn unto your Lord (al-*Dhāriyāt* 51:50)." Then He informed on the tongue of the best of creations (Prophet Muhammad [peace be upon him]) "and I know not what will be done with me or with you (al-*Zumar* 39:54)."<sup>73</sup>
7. A man came to Abū Yazīd and said, "What is *taşawwuf*?" He replied to him, "O thou! If *taşawwuf* is named, its name would hide Abū Yazīd in Abū Yazīd and then Abū Yazīd would not know who Abū Yazīd is."<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> "*Al-Taşawwuf wafā' bilā 'ahd wa jidd bilā takalluf wa isrār bilā ishārah.*" Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī bin al-Ḥasan al-Sirjānī, *al-Bayād wa al-Sawād min Khaṣā'ish ḥikam al-'Ibād fī Na't al-Murīd wa al-Murād*, (A Critical Edition of Kitāb al-Bayād wa-l-Sawād by Abū l-Ḥasan al-Sirjānī (d. ca.470/1077)), eds. Bilal Orfali and Nada Saab (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), paragraph no. 92.

<sup>71</sup> "*Al-Taşawwuf nūr sha 'sha 'ānī ramaqatha al-abṣār falāḥazahā.*" Al-Sahlajī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 184.

<sup>72</sup> "*Al-Taşawwuf šifat al-Ḥaqq yulbisuhā al-'abd.*" Al-Sahlajī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 110.

<sup>73</sup> "*Al-Taşawwuf taḥayyur 'ala bāb al-Ḥaqq ma' muhājarat al-khalq. Alā tara ilā qawlihi ta'āla (faḥirru ila Allāh) (wa anībū ila rabbikum) thumma qāla ikhbāran 'an khayr al-khalq "mā adrī mā yuf'alu bī wa la bikum."* Mi 'yār *al-Taşawwuf*, 124.

<sup>74</sup> "*Jā'a rajulun ila Abī Yazīd faqāla "mā al-taşawwuf?" faqāla lahu Yā Hadhā "In wusima al-taşawwuf fasmuhu qad ghayyaba Abū (sic) Yazīd fī Abī Yazīd falā ya 'rifu Abū Yazīd mā abū Yazīd."* Mi 'yār *al-Taşawwuf*, 103.



8. Abu Yazid was asked, "Does will remain with *ṭaṣawwuf*?" He replied, "The end of the will is the beginning of *ṭaṣawwuf*."<sup>75</sup>
9. The Sufi is he who has become blind to all except the beloved out of protective jealousy and who has become blind to his beloved in awe of Him.<sup>76</sup>
10. The Sufi is he who has completely surrendered to the dispositions of His Lordship, completely veiled by the dispositions of his servitude.<sup>77</sup>
11. The Sufi is he in whose heart nothing occurs other than His greatness, whose tongue is engaged with nothing except His remembrance, whose eyes behold nothing but His power, whose hand does not stretch except towards His cause; he moves not except through Him and for Him and the world never receives his attention nor does the Hereafter have any effect upon him.<sup>78</sup>
12. The Sufis are children in the lap of the God.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> "Su'ila Abū Yazīd, "Hal tabqa al-Irādah ma'a al-ṭaṣawwuf? Qāl nihāyatuhā bidāyatuh." Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī bin al-Ḥasan al-Sirjānī, *al-Bayād wa al-Sawād min Khaṣā'is Ḥikam al-'Ibād fī Na't al-Murīd wa al-Murād*, paragraph no. 679.

<sup>76</sup> "Al-Ṣūfī huwa alladhī 'amiya 'an ḡayr al-ḡabīb ḡhīratan lahu, wa 'amiya 'an al-maḡbūb ḡaybatan lahu." Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Ma'rīfat al-Asrār* (Leaf 134-164), Kastomonu, Yazma Eser Kütüphanesi, MSS 02713/8, 154.

<sup>77</sup> "Al-Ṣūfī maḡhūr taḡta taṣārīf al-rubūbiyyah, mastūr bi taṣārīf al-'ubūdiyyah (al-raḡmāniyyah)." Mi'yār al-Ṭaṣawwuf, 126; al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah*, 2/444. This definition has been quoted by al-Qushayrī without ascribing it to anyone using the word *yūqāl*.

<sup>78</sup> "Al-Ṣūfī huwa alladhī lā yakḡtur 'ala qalbihi illā 'aḡamatuh wa lā yajrī 'ala lisānihi illā dhikruhu, wa lā yanḡur bi 'aynihi illā ila qudratih, wa lā yamuḡdu yadahu illā ila amrihi, wa lā yataḡarraku illā bihi wa li aḡlihi, wa lā kḡaḡara li al-dunyā 'indahu wa lā athara li al-ākhirah 'alayhi." Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Ma'rīfat al-Asrār*, 157.

<sup>79</sup> "Al-Ṣūfiyyah atfāl fī ḡijr al-ḡaqq." Al-Sahlajī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 167; Abū Bakr al-Kalābādhī, *al-Ta'arruf li Madḡhab ahl al-Ṭaṣawwuf*, 91. The translation has been taken from A. J. Arberry, *The Doctrine of the Sufis*, 81.

13. He (Abū Yazīd) was asked about *ṭaṣawwuf* upon which he replied, "He is the one who takes the Book of Allah with his right hand and the *sunnah* of His Prophet with his left hand; he beholds paradise with one of his eyes and with the other beholds hellfire; he makes the world his loin cloth and the Day of Judgement his cloak and responds to the call of His Master 'Here I am O God, here I am.'"<sup>80</sup>

Taking a closer look at these sayings, we can divide these definitions into two groups; one that seemingly tries to define *ṭaṣawwuf* or to bring the concept closer to mind and the other, which points to the characteristics of the Sufi or the experiential realities of the path. Sayings from one to eight (1-8) belong to the first group while the remaining four (9-13) belong to the second. They provide clear hints about the nature of this paradoxical transcendental and spiritual experience. More importantly, the contents display, beyond any doubt, the presence of an undisputedly fully developed Sufi thought and practice, well before the end of the first Abbasid period, which ends with 247/861.

As I mentioned earlier, these sayings have been recorded by authentic Sufi scholars and hagiographers. What strikes me, however, is the fact that al-Sarrāj – an ardent supporter and defender of Abū Yazīd who went to the city of Bistām to investigate about the ecstatic utterances of Abū Yazīd – never recorded any of Abū Yazīd's definitions. What is perhaps even more surprising that al-Qushayrī in his *al-Risālah*, which has become a classic manual of the Sufis, mentions Abū Yazīd around

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<sup>80</sup> "Su'ila 'an al-Ṣūfī faqāl huwa alladhī ya'khudh Kitāb Allāh biyamīnih wa sunnat rasūlih bishimālih wa yanẓur bi ihḍa 'aynayhi ila al-jannah wa bi al-ukhra ila al-nār wa ya'tazir bi al-dunyā wa yartadī bi al-ākhirah wa yulabbī min baynihimā li al-mawla: labbayk allahumma labbayk." Al-Sahljā, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 124.

forty times in the context of serious issues of *taşawwuf*, in addition to the brief account he provided of him, but he never records any sayings of Abū Yazīd on defining *taşawwuf*, although, in a chapter dedicated to defining *taşawwuf*, he enlists more than 40 definitions of *taşawwuf* and Sufis, some of which are anonymous.

It is interesting to note that definition number 10 (in my list) is Abū Yazīdian but has been reported anonymously in other sources. This increases the possibility of a deliberate attempt to distance from Abū Yazīd due to the antagonistic climate of the intellectual world of the time. Whatever the reason might be, we will take a look at these definitions of Abū Yazīd to see what they have to reveal to us. The limited space here would not allow us to analyse every definition.

### **Definitions One to Eight: What is *Taşawwuf*?**

As we mentioned earlier, we have eight answers to this question from Abū Yazīd. We will begin with the first one, which is an interesting one with regard to its source. Al-Sahljāī, the most important source for Abū Yazīd's *taşawwuf*, records on the authority of the great Persian Sufi, Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad bin 'Abd Allāh al-Shirāzī that he heard Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ḥanzalī who heard Muammal al-Khassas saying that, "I have never heard about *taşawwuf* anything better than what Abū Yazīd has said. I saw him in my dream and asked him what *taşawwuf* is?" He replied: "*Shadd al-Arfāq wa Sadd al-Awrāq*" (the tying of the rope [around the waist to bear extreme hunger] and blocking the corpse [allegorically meaning obstructing the desires of the body])."<sup>81</sup>

It might be considered legitimate to question the academic value of this definition because of its source. Nevertheless, we should not lose sight of the fact that we are here dealing with the world of spiritual experience, in

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<sup>81</sup> Al-Sahljāī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 83.

which dreams play an important role. Very often, we find in Sufi culture that what is derived from a dream is given priority over what is achieved through ordinary means. The Sufis in general take dreams very seriously and it is the authentic tradition of the Prophet (peace be upon him) that states, "The dream of the believer is one of forty-six parts of prophecy."<sup>82</sup>

Now, looking at this answer, it is clear that it is referring to a basic foundational aspect of *taşawwuf* that is "controlling one's lust and elevating one's self." This is usually called *mujāhadat al-nafs*.<sup>83</sup> This is the backbone of the Sufi path and continues with travellers until the end of their journey on the path if it is at all possible to imagine an end. Without trying to read much into it, some might think that this is not in any way a definition of *taşawwuf* in the sense that it encompasses all aspects of it. It is only partially true for it stops with mentioning the first practical step of *taşawwuf*.

The fact of the matter, however, is otherwise. We have to acknowledge the fact that *mujāhadat al-nafs* is one of the intrinsic and abiding conditions of the path of *taşawwuf*, which is self-transformation and one of its natural characteristics is "continuity". It continues with the seeker in all his steps and at all states and stations he passes through in his endless journey. Each state of this journey or "spiritual ascension" demands a form of

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<sup>82</sup> Muḥammad bin Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhayr bin Nāṣir (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Nājah, 1422AH), 9/37. Abū Yazīdian tradition that developed in to what is known today as the Naqshabandiyyah order at times gives more weight to Uwaysī spiritual masters than immediate ones. This means that a Shaykh of the past might be able to mentor a certain seeker of the path without physically being present with him as one finds between Imām Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (148AH/765CE) and Abū Yazīd or between Abū Yazīd and Abū al-Ḥasan al-Kharaqānī (425AH/1033CE).

<sup>83</sup> There are many other terms in the Sufi lexicon to denote this meaning among which are *al-Taşfiyah* and *al-Tazkiyah*.

*mujāhadat al-nafs* appropriate for that state. This understanding of *mujāhadah* should take us to another important dimension of it, which is its relation to the notion of annihilation *fanā*'.

This very notion, if considered closely, will display itself as a synonym for the notion of *mujāhadah*. *Fanā*' after all and in its final outcome, is nothing but transformation, which is summarized as annihilation and substitution (*al-fanā' wa al-baqā'*). When we ponder upon the classification of *fanā*', in Sufi sources, into three<sup>84</sup> or seven as detailed by Ibn 'Arabī,<sup>85</sup> we can easily identify this connection and understand that, the concept of *jihād al-nafs* reveals the totality of Sufi experience in its most profound expressions.

Many sayings of Abū Yazīd explain the practicalities of this *jihād al-nafs*, which is considered the greatest of *jihād* in the Sufi tradition. Many metaphors were used by Abū Yazīd to bring closer to understanding the nature of this struggle towards spiritual perfection. Entering into that area is not our objective here. Suffice here to state that here we have a very clear explanation of one of the most important foundational aspects of *taṣawwuf*, belonging to that early period. This clarity of concept shows that *taṣawwuf* must have had a long history, which goes well before the entry of Abū Yazīd into the world of *taṣawwuf*.

From the very beginning of the second century itself, we start hearing utterances which are trying to explain in one way or another the nature of *taṣawwuf*. Bakr bin 'Abd Allāh al-Muzanī has been reported as having said of *taṣawwuf* that it is "a combination of three elements: making meditation ones nutrition, dining on remembrance

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<sup>84</sup> Al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah*, 256; also Ibn 'Aṭā' illāh al-Iskandarī, *Laṭā'if al-Minan*, ed. 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd (Cairo: Maṭba'at Ḥasan, n.d.), 82.

<sup>85</sup> See *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*, 4 volume edition (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 2/512-514.

along with seclusion from others and from all that distracts one from being in the presence of God."<sup>86</sup> This means that when Abū Yazīd appeared on the scene, *taşawwuf* had been a living tradition. There are at least fifty years between his entry into *taşawwuf* and the demise of al-Başī and al-Muzanī.<sup>87</sup>

If we shift to the second definition of *taşawwuf* by Abū Yazīd, that is: "*Taşawwuf* is hurling the self in His slavery, attaching the heart to His Lordship, practicing all exalted virtues and beholding Allah in totality", we find ourselves at the heart of the Sufi experience, that is being explained through some very important fundamental concepts. What I have rendered here as slavery (*al-'ubūdiyyah*) means complete surrender to God through which one proves his being God's slave. This is a very important idea. This is the idea of "I want not to want" which was expressed by Abū Yazīd himself when God asked him what do you want? This is also the very idea of *fanā'* that has been, as a spiritual state, identified with Abū Yazīd.<sup>88</sup> In his reply to the one who asked him about *taşawwuf* he said: "its name would hide Abū Yazīd in Abū Yazīd so that Abū Yazīd does not know who Abū Yazīd is."

The words used here are notable. We see this definition consists of four key phrases; each one of them highlights a vital concept around which *taşawwuf*

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<sup>86</sup> *Mi 'yār al-Taşawwuf*, Leaf 123.

<sup>87</sup> I am trying to suggest here that the first phase of the history of *Taşawwuf* must begin from the time of the prophet (peace be upon him) to the end of first Abbasid period.

<sup>88</sup> A. J. Arberry, *Revelation and Reason in Islam*, 90-103 where Arberry discusses the *fanā'* experience of Abū Yazīd. Some consider al-Kharrāz and still others al-Junayd as the eponym of the concept of *fanā'*. While Abū Yazīd is the first one to expound the experience, we can consider al-Kharrāz and al-Junayd as the first ones to have produced treatises on this issue. The sayings of Abū Yazīd and his experience provide enough evidence for those who consider him to be the pioneer in this regard.

revolves. The literal translation of the first phrase says, "Hurling the self in His slavery". The word "hurling" implies two inter-connected or consequential concepts: sacrifice and love or love and sacrifice. It says in other words that no journey along the path of *taşawwuf* can be conceived unless it is founded on "Divine Love" which will have as its first demand the full surrender of the lover (the Sufi) to his beloved (God). The word also implies that this love should be unconditional and voluntary to the extent that it elevates the Lover to the level of unconditional surrendering.

This is what *ṭarh* means in this context. The idea can be expressed for example by phrases like "realizing slavehood". But this will be a formal expression that might not capture the psychological and emotional depth that is contained in the word *ṭarh*.

The second phrase, likewise, conveys another vital concept, that is "attaching of the heart to His Lordship". This is really a remarkable construction. "Lordship" instead of "Divinehood" is striking. When we talk about turning away from all worldly objects or transcending material considerations, we are within the premises of the theophanies of the "lordship" or the Divine name *Rabb*. Surrendering fully and willingly in the first phrase, which is the "realization of slavehood", lies in getting rid of the worldly bonds, by way of taking refuge in the Lordship of the Divine, which will be the natural gateway towards proximity.

It is worth noting on the other hand the use of word "attaching". It can be translated as "connecting the heart". But "attaching" also refers to the struggle of the Sufi in not only connecting rather staying perpetually connected and as such, it conveys the exceptional difficulty of the spiritual journey. This very idea has been latter expressed in a definition by Abū Nu‘aym al-İşfahānī in which he

says: *Taşawwuf* is "suffering the anxiety in order to maintain the connection or attachment (to the Divine)." <sup>89</sup>

If the third phrase of the definition "practicing all exalted virtues" can represent the individual characters of the Sufi and their social dimensions, the fourth and the final one comes to explain the continuous nature of the state of living in the Divine presence. That is the state of *ihsān*, mentioned in the famous *Ḥadīth Jibrīl*, in its ultimate, and humanly possible, manifestation.

If we take all those four key concepts contained in this definition with their experiential ramifications, we find ourselves in front of a well-developed spiritual life, which demands a complete absence of the self. Another of his saying mentioned in the list above clarifies this in practical terms. In his reply to the one who asked him about *taşawwuf* he said, "Its name has hidden Abū Yazīd in Abū Yazīd so that Abū Yazīd does not know who Abū Yazīd is." When considered as an experience of love and union with God, hardly anything can be said more than this.

Let us take the third definition where he says: *taşawwuf* is "loyalty without covenant, earnestness without affectation and mysteries without signs". What is being mentioned here are some aspects of the outlook that are observable among Sufis, especially after the initial stages of their spiritual journey. This definition introduces the idea that will later develop as a popular Sufi concept of *isqāt al-kulfah*, which is a state of the self in which the obedience (*tā'ah*) represents a most blissful act, and in which a Sufi finds the solace of his heart and a priceless opportunity to experience the presence of God.

The prophetic saying "my delight has been made in the prayer" <sup>90</sup> symbolizes this state. That is the state where

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<sup>89</sup> "Al-*taşawwuf* muqāsāt al-qalaq fī murā'āt al-'alaq." Abū Nu'aym al-Işfahānī, *Hilyat al-Awliyā'*, 1/185.



one finds his pleasure and joy in being with God. The Sufi does not need reward to be obedient. Rather he will be finding the solace of his heart and the joy of his being in living in the state of obedience, in complete submission to the Divine will, in annihilating his desire or will and surrendering himself to God, Who has become his beloved. He performs and obeys without a pledge. The seriousness with which he performs makes him not look for excuses in practicing religion. He finds himself in full comfort and complete serenity when he carries out whatever Sharī'a wants him as best as possible.

This is what is being conveyed by *jidd bilā takalluf*. The sincerity with which he lives makes him silent and it is the outflow of spiritual blessings that draws him out of his silence.<sup>91</sup> What the Sufis have written on "sincerity" (*ikhhlās*) shows clearly the level of consciousness of being in the Divine presence, which permeates all their activities. We will see this characteristic reflects in different levels in Abū Yazīd's answer to a question: who is a Sufi?

The fourth saying of Abū Yazīd is that: "*Taṣawwuf* is an illuminating light that was caught by the eyes (of the heart) and then observed it". I am not sure if this could be considered a definition as such. It does not say anything that relates to an active state of the Sufi experience which can be conceptualized in clear terms. It remains, however, an important saying that refers, vaguely so, to a characteristic of the Sufi contemplation and meditation; it refers to the unstable nature of many occurrences that the Sufi possibly comes across at any moment of his experience.

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<sup>90</sup> This is part of a very famous saying of the Prophet peace be upon him. See Ibn 'Arabī's treatment of this *ḥadīth* in Ibn 'Arabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam: The Ringstones of Wisdom*, trans. Caner Dagli (Lahore: Suhail Academy Lahore, 2011), 276.

<sup>91</sup> See the chapters on rituals in al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* and Ibn 'Arabī's *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyyah*.

This saying is an excellent example of what is generally said about the quality of transiency, as well as the quality of ineffability, which is mentioned in Sufi writing as characterizing the Sufi experience. This aspect of Sufi life cannot be generalized. It is individualistic and belongs to that particular individual who is experiencing it alone, a passing experience that does not say anything comprehensible. It is usually said about definitions of *taṣawwuf* that they are personal. This would be an extreme example of that.

It is not clear whether this saying was uttered as a definition of *taṣawwuf per se*. There is the possibility of this saying being an expression of *taṣawwuf* as a spiritual state within the spiritual life, which is also called *taṣawwuf*. Ibn ‘Arabī makes this distinction clearly and so does al-Qushayrī before him. Whatever be the case, this can neither be a definition for the spiritual wayfarer in Islam nor a state that enjoys commonality among the practitioners of *taṣawwuf*.

As for the fifth saying which says, “*Taṣawwuf* is an attribute of the *Ḥaqq* (Truth) assumed by the slave”, it is an expression of the highest stages of the spiritual journey. As we can see, the state of metaphysical ultimacy of the spiritual experience and the awareness of being in God’s presence are expressed here in a language, which despite being metaphorical, is clear enough to convey the intended meaning. Even the “state of no state” about which Sufis talk can find its root in what is expressed through the last definition. The idea of theophany (*tajallī*) in its Sufi connotation is also very clear here.<sup>92</sup>

We do not have to wait neither for Ibn ‘Arabī, nor for the Sufis of the second half of the third/ninth century such as al-Kharrāz or al-Junayd. This definition introduces the

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<sup>92</sup> In fact there are many sayings of Abū Yazīd discussing this very idea in connection to Divine names and in relation to the gnostic (‘*ārif*). See for instance al-Sahlaǧī, *al-Nūr min Kalimāt Abī Ṭayfūr*, 107.

Sufi, in his state of "union", the highest of Sufi experience, in simple, but semantically profound language. It conveys what is usually considered the most advanced area of spiritual life. Although Muslim jurists unwelcomed these types of utterances of the Sufis, they, nevertheless, maintained a sympathetic understanding of them in general.<sup>93</sup>

The fact of the matter, however, is that, whatever the extent the Sufis go in expressing their experience, which is here expressed as the Sufi becomes the self-manifestation of Divine attribute, it can never reach the level of the expression, revealed by God through the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) when he said:

"God, ever blessed and exalted is He, says, "Whoever treats a friend of mine as an enemy, on him I declare war. My servant draws nearer to me than that which I have established as a duty for him. And my servant does not cease to approach me through supererogatory acts until I love him. And when I love him, I become his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks. And if he asks me [for something], I give it to him. If he seeks refuge with me, I place him under my protection. In nothing do I hesitate so much as I hesitate [to take] the soul of a believer. He

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<sup>93</sup> Muḥammad bin Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, 8/105. Of course, these are not to be confused with another genre of utterances known as *Shāḥ* which has been translated by Carl Ernst as "ecstatic expression". These are – again quoting Carl Ernst who translates from a Persian lexicon – "certain words resembling infidelity, which are uttered by the Sufi in overpowering ecstasy". See his *Words of Ecstasy in Sufism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1985), 3. These expressions have been a source of tension between Sufis and jurists throughout history.

has a horror of death, and I have horror of harming him".<sup>94</sup>

Abū Yazīd's saying is nothing but expression of truths of this *al-Ḥadīth al-Qudsī*. To be completely lost in God is simply the essence of this *ḥadīth*. The majority of scholars – theologians and jurists – did not like to reflect too much on those key concepts introduced in this *ḥadīth*. They simply subjected them to some sort of allegorical interpretations and were satisfied with the outcome that denied the possibility of any intimacy with the Divine. The idea of Divine love remained contested in the circles of most theologians and jurist. But, simply asking of what the "idea of becoming" implies we will come to the heart of what Abū Yazīd is saying about *taṣawwuf*. In my opinion, all what Abū Yazīd conveys through his sayings can be reduced to one single idea that is "becoming", or *fanā*'.

### **Definitions Nine to Thirteen: Who is a Sufi?**

Taking up some of Abū Yazīd's sayings about "Sufis", and reflecting upon the attributes with which he identifies them, one realizes that they are but a reflection of what has already been said. We have five sayings from Abū Yazīd enlisted above. They eventually refer to the attributes of a Sufi as someone who is living in a state of proximity to Allah and give us some hints, with the help of which, we can make sense of this state of being.

A Sufi is blind in the sense that he does not see others because he is with his beloved. When you are in the presence of God, there is nothing, but witnessing His beauty and living in its presence. This is the state of complete self-annihilation, the highest level of *fanā*' which is known as *fanā' al-fanā'*. The paradox here is that

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<sup>94</sup> Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn 'Arabī, *Divine Sayings: 101 Ḥadīth Qudsī, The Mishkāt al-Anwār of Ibn 'Arabī*, trans. Stephen Hirtenstein and Martin Notcutt (Oxford: Anqa Publishing, 2008), 70.

the Sufi will be so humbled by the Divine theophany that he will not be able to remain stable under this state of "witnessing" (*shuhūd*). He is in a state of complete surrender as the second definition states. Therefore, it is not surprising to know – as the third definition states – that he does not see but God. He does not remember but Him. He does not see anything but the manifestations of His power, he moves only by Him and for Him, neither this world nor the next are of his concern.

It is logical then to see – as the fourth definition states – that, "The Sūfīs are children in the lap of the God". This is a sublime symbolic expression about the state of both love and union. It is a state which has been explained by the use of several terms such as *al-ghaybah wa al-ḥuḍūr* and *al-shuhūd*, *al-jam' wa al-qurb*, *al-maḥw wa al-ithbāt* and many others.<sup>95</sup> This state of union is the one in which we witness unanimity in expression despite diversity in the particularity of experience. Each experiencer experiences what is intended for him or opened for him from the shoreless ocean of Divine theophanies according to his individual capacity, but the expression comes from all of them almost in the same manner where we can read the basic unanimity of the experience. What is most striking here is the ineffable and inexhaustible quality of this experience, one maintained

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<sup>95</sup> The difficulty of describing this state can be observed from the plethora of terms that are utilized to talk about it; *laḥza* (glimpse), *istislām* (surrender), *inbisāt* (exhilaration), *uns* (intimacy), *mu'āyanah* (observation), *dahshah* (consternation), *fanā'* (annihilation), *wajd* (ecstasy) *i'tiṣām* (clinging to God), *tadhallul* (meekness), *ghurbah* (exile), *futūḥ* (victory), *tafrīd* (detachment), *wilāyah* (friendship with God), *yaqīn* (certainty), *ḥayrah* (perplexity), *ma'rifah* (gnosis), *al-jam' wa al-tafrīqah* (unification and separation), *al-lawā'ih* (glimmers), *al-lawāmi'* (flashes), *al-ṭawāli'* (dawnings). For more on this please see, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *al-Risālah*, 231-293 and Abdullah Ansari of Herat, *Stations of the Sufi Path: The 'One Hundred Fields' (Sad Maydan)* (Cambridge: Archetype, 2010).

by all practitioners of *ṭaṣawwuf* and agreed upon by scholars, Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

This state also happens to be the one where we observe the meeting of opposites. This is in fact the paradox of the Sufi experience, where 'witnessing' (*shuhūd*) causes the 'absence' (*ghaybah*). Knowledge finds itself in ignorance, and the "I" discovers itself in the "He". It might be true to even say that, all these outward classifications disappear in the midst of overwhelming pressure of theophanies of the state of 'proximity' (*qurb*). This is the state which is exclusively individual in all its manifestations.

Having said that, it must be remembered that this is just a state in the long and arduous spiritual journey. Vital as it is though, it cannot cross the limits of the Sharī'a. It is here that the significance of the last saying of Abū Yazīd about the Sufi as being "the one who takes the Book of Allah with his right hand and the *sunnah* of His Prophet with his left hand..., manifests itself most glaringly and describes the spiritual journey in its fullness, from the beginning to the end.

All what these definitions have revealed as states and characteristics of the Sufi experience can be summarized in one core term i.e. *iḥsān* which by the very definition given in the *ḥadīth*<sup>96</sup> means living in the presence of God; so whether one talks about *fanā*, *ghaybah*, *qurb*, *shuhūd* or the likes, they are all manifestations or indicators of various levels of *iḥsān* in accordance with the spiritual capacity of the experiencing individual.

## Conclusion

In the light of the above brief discussion of Abū Yazīd's definitions of *ṭaṣawwuf*, the following can be conveniently concluded.

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<sup>96</sup> See *Ḥadīth Jibrīl* in Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 1994), xxv-xxvi.

1. These definitions are some of the earlier ones, showing a highly developed concept of *ṭaṣawwuf*, and are rich in content from both the theoretical and experiential perspectives. The concept as seen in these sayings encompasses all aspects of the Sufi path, to the extent that, in my reckoning there is little substantial material that was added by subsequent generations of Sufis. They introduce *ṭaṣawwuf* as a way, and as an experience, and allude to all of its most important manifestations at different levels.
2. They also introduce to the Sufi lexicon many rich and highly sophisticated, technical vocabulary and phrases such as *al-Ṭarh*, *al-Ghīrah*, *al-Haybah*, *Ṭaṣārīf al-Rubūbiyyah*, *al-Qahr*, *al-Satr*, *al-Nūr al-Sha‘sha‘ānī* and *Hijr al-Ḥaq*. These terms are connected to ideas, which are, when analysed, go deeper into the ocean of Sufi experience of “proximity” and “witnessing”. They connect together ethical and psychological dimensions of the spiritual wayfarer with the depth of Sufi states and stations and their metaphysics.
3. The depth, maturity and clarity of expression conveyed by these definitions prompt us to think that spiritual realization was a living reality even before Abū Yazīd.
4. Again, the depth of these sayings encourages us to not to wait for the second half of the third century to talk about a full-fledged growth of *ṭaṣawwuf*. What I imply here is that in the light of these sayings the periodization of the history of *ṭaṣawwuf* can be reconstructed to make the end of its first phase

coincide with the end of the first Abbasid period, that is 247/861<sup>97</sup> as I have mentioned earlier.

5. The wrong dating of his life could be the main reason for these definitions not being given the importance they deserve or being completely ignored. It is important in this regard to highlight the fact that Abū Yazīd lived in the period between 161-234AH and represents a central figure in *taşawwuf*.
6. The absence of a proper appreciation of Abū Yazīd's definitions in the context of the writing of history demands that a serious study of the Khurāsānian school of *taşawwuf* be conducted in conjunction with its Baghdadian counterpart.

At the end, it is hoped that highlighting these definition could be a step forward in this direction, and encourage researchers to further explore into the early period of Islamic history, especially that of the first and second centuries which largely remain unexplored until today in this regard.

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<sup>97</sup> The first Abbasid period begins in 132/750, with the ascension of Abū al-'Abbās 'Abd Allāh bin Muḥammad, famously known as *al-Saffāh*, to the throne.



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