

## The Spiritual Path: A Eagle's-Eye View of the Way of the Mystics

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**Sensing something:** The individual senses a secret beauty, or is overwhelmed with glory, or feels that there must be more than this, or is shaken awake, full of questions, by the pain of life.

**Setting out:** Answering the call, the individual leaves conventional life, inwardly or outwardly, and becomes one who is seeking, one on the path.

**Gleams of Truth:** The individual receives confirmation, great or small, that there is indeed somewhere to go. There may be bliss, joy, ecstasy, flashes of understanding, enhanced meaning in daily events.

**Tests and Difficulties:** After, perhaps, believing that the path would open continuously like a flower, one finds that progress is stalled, or the path is lost, or a teacher is disappointing, or one's own self is full of faults, weakness and resistance. There may be despair.

**Finding a Teacher:** God willing (in Islam, *inshallah*), a true teacher may be found: someone who actually *knows*, is not out for money or fame, and can somehow see the particular soul and spirit, the good and bad tendencies, the flavor and essential individuality, of the student.

**Study and Practice:** The student, under the teacher's direction, makes prayers, repeats sacred phrases and holy names, tries to eliminate bad tendencies, seeks even-mindedness, and attempts to go within through contemplation and meditation. Practices may include any of the following: use of prayer beads, fasting, music, body movement, physical work as service, study of scriptures or saints' lives, or meditative focus on visual objects or on the breath.

**Finding Companions or Community:** One may find friends of like mind on the path, the *sanga* (Buddhism) – even sweeter after the loneliness of solitary seeking.

**Alternating States of Expansion and Contraction:** This journey moves like breath pouring in, then out, or a pitcher filling, then emptying. States of lightness, joy and illumination alternate with states of darkness, heaviness and confusion, just as a snail moves forward by hunching up and stretching out again.

**Attaining New Levels:** God willing the snail moves forward! There is true growth and advancement. As Muslims would say, this is a change of *makam* (station, level, default setting), not just of *hal* (temporary state).

**Tests and Difficulties:** Reaching the top of one mountain reveals yet another mountain. And sometimes one falls *down* the mountain. Every stage has its own trials and dangers. ‘Purgation’, ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ (Christianity) or similar states can occur even after significant attainment.

**Light upon Light:** Glorious states of peace, bliss, illumination, ecstasy and nearness come to those on the path. One may be embraced and befriended by the Beloved, absorbed in *Sat Chit Ananda* (Hinduism: Being, Knowledge, Bliss) or experience something even higher. The layers of increasing awareness continue upward.

#### **Entering the Market Place with Helping Hands and/or Disappearance in**

**Transcendence:** If the lower self is eventually transcended, one becomes the *insan kamil* (Islam, perfected human being). This changed being may continue to serve all beings or may disappear into the Infinite. Buddhism calls these two types the *bodhisatva* and the *arhat*. Islam speaks of *fana* and *baqa*: effacement and subsistence (or reappearance as the One.)

**As God wills:** There is no end to the enormous variety of individual variations and the increasing power, subtlety and depth of the stations on this journey toward something which can never be understood, but can be intimately known. The intimations at the beginning of the path were true: The Real is indeed real.