

Practical Sufism: A Field Guide to the Spiritual Path

Phillip Gowins

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Sufism piques the curiosity of a good-sized audience, making Sufi poet Rumi a bestselling author centuries after his passing. In Phillip Gowins' new book, *Practical Sufism*, readers meet a real-life American guy who chose Sufism as his spiritual practice, why he did, and how his practice unfolded.

Gowins, a woodworker, first met Pir Vilayat Inayat Khan at a public talk in 1979 and committed himself to a Sufi path. He is now among a small circle of teachers, "representatives" of the Sufi Order International in the West, founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan, father of Gowins' first mentor.

Gowins is at heart a teacher, and his personal struggles become teaching moments. In the chapter titled, "A Passion for the Unattainable," he identifies a "primal longing" that he had covered up with sex, drugs, and science fiction. As he let go of his nicotine habit, "I came to the conclusion that the throb was simply spiritual yearning of which all the ecstatic poets speak."

He illustrates the challenges in living up to the high ideals of his community. During a two-week solo retreat, he observes, "...not eight or nine days of increasing wonder and awe as the blessed state comes ever closer, but eight or nine days of 'Why in the world did I ever agree to do this?'"

Intriguing chapter titles grab readers' attention. In "The Path of Embarrassment," the author notes, "...you look at yourself and are greatly embarrassed to discover that you are a jerk." Sharing his personal challenges, wisdom from his teachers, stories of Sufi mystics, and anecdotes from his students, the author provides glimpses into the inner sanctum of an esoteric, mystic path that few westerners have experienced close-up.

Deceptively simple practices form the foundation for all spiritual growth, and Gowins, good instructor that he is, offers eighteen exercises, starting with "Balancing the Breath" and concluding with "You Are a Being of Light II."

While Gowins is neither a scholar nor the loftiest Sufi thought leader, his commitment to teaching this path shines through. Readers following his nonlinear journey will be well rewarded with an understanding what it means to live with this level of spiritual intent and gaining tools and resources to explore further. For religion and spirituality sections in personal and public libraries, Gowins' aptly named book fills the need for an accessible, practical, all-too-human peek behind the curtain at a mystic path directly transmitted from teacher to student for centuries.

BOBBYE MIDDENDORF (November / December 2010)

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