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SHAH WALI ALLAH OF DELHI'S ARRANGEMENT OF THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTRES (LATA'IF)

MARCIA K. HERMÄNSEN

An Aspect of his thought explained using material from the collection of religious and philosophical letters being edited for publication under the auspices of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, Tughlaqabad, New Delhi (India).1

This paper will present an explanation of some previously unexamined aspects of Shâh Walî Allâh’s (d. 1762) conception of the subtle spiritual centres (laţâ'if). For Shâh Walî Allâh these spiritual components of a person were of great importance in explaining the theory and practice of individual spiritual progress on the Şûfi path. His arrangement of these centres, together with his explanation of their interaction with one another directly reflects his more comprehensive understanding of cosmology and ontology, and therefore this aspect of his thought is less esoteric than it might initially seem.

The term laţifa is derived from the Arabic word laţif meaning gentle, sensitive, or subtle. In Şûfi terminology the term laţifa first emerged in reference to the idea of a subtle body (jism-e laţif) associated with the spiritual dimension of the person. It was believed by the Şûfis that this non-material part of the person was the most susceptible to spiritual discipline and exercises. Eventually the theoretically oriented Şûfis developed systematic models and a terminology of these centres related to the various spiritual aspects of individuals in which each one of these particular aspects was considered a laţifa, (pl. laţâ'if). The word laţifa, in this context, has on occasions been translated “subtlety,” “subtle point,” or “subtle essence.” Since some of these laţâ'if have been diagrammed in the works of Shâh Walî Allâh with circular shapes2 I prefer to translate laţâ'if as “subtle spiritual centres” following the usage by Annemarie Schimmel,3 although the concept of “centre” is not necessarily to be understood from the term itself.

Among the Şûfî writers, Shâh Walî Allâh provides one of the most detailed explanations of the laţâ'if, to which he devoted an entire book,
Alīf al-Quds\(^4\) as well as many references in his mystical works such as al-Tafsīhīt al-Ilāhiyya.

Shāh Wālī Allāh in his description of the \(\text{lata'īf}\) further developed a model existing among the Naqshbāndi Sūfīs, in particular the Naqshbāndiya-Mujaddidiyya branch, so called because they followed the tradition of Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1625) who was known as the Mujaddid or Renewer of the Second Millenium. This system was based on the idea that the human being had ten basic parts—five material and five immaterial. The lower level of the material parts consisted of the Lower Soul (\(nafs\)) and the four elements (fire, earth, air, and water), while the higher level consisted of the five \(\text{lata’īf}\), sometimes referred to as the five jewels (\(al-jawāhir\) \(al-khamsa\)); the Heart (\(qalb\)), Spirit (\(rūḥ\)), Mystery (\(sirr\)), Arcane (\(khāfī\)) and the Most or Super-Arcane (\(akhfā\)).\(^5\) (Refer to the diagram on the next page for a depiction of this model.) The two levels of this Naqshbāndi system were said to correspond to the distinction between the World of God’s Command (\(\text{‘ālam\ al-amr}\)) and the World of God’s Creation (\(\text{‘ālam\ al-khalq}\)), a distinction based on Qur’ānic terminology and having a long history in Sūfī thought. An example is the interpretation of the Qur’ānic verse, “the Spirit is from the Command (\(‘amr\)) of my Lord” (17:85), which is understood by the Sūfis to mean that the human spirit (\(rūḥ\)) originates in the immaterial, timeless world of God’s Command (\(\text{‘ālam\ al-‘amr}\)) at a level preceding any temporal, physical manifestation.

It is also interesting to note that the five-fold structure of the \(\text{lata’īf}\) according to the Naqshbāndiya-Mujaddidiyya model seems to parallel the concept in Hellenized Islamic medical theory (\(tibb\)) in which a person has five inner (mental) and five outer (physical) senses.

While the model of the \(\text{lata’īf}\) according to Shāh Wālī Allāh is described most fully in his mystical works such as al-Tafsīhīt al-Ilāhiyya and Alīf al-Quds, he appears to have continually refined these concepts throughout his life since works which are apparently earlier, such as his Hand iyat and Ḥujjat Allāh al-Bāligha, allude to aspects of it in an incomplete or preliminary way. In his most complete version of the structure of the spiritual components of the person, Shāh Wālī Allāh expanded the Naqshbāndi model to include a higher, third level comprised of five centres which he termed the Concealed Subtle Spiritual Centres (\(al-Latā‘if\) \(al-Kāmina\)). The diagram at p. 141 presented in this paper is based on one accompanying his description of these centres in
A NAQSHBANDIYYA-MUJADDIDIYYA MODEL OF THE LATA'IF AND THE SPIRITUAL PATH

THE WORLD OF GOD'S COMMAND (ĀLAM AL-ʿAMR)

- Level of Undifferentiation (Lā Taʿāyyun)
- Perfections of Prophecy (Kamālât al-Nubuwwat)
- Greater Saintship (al-Wilāyat al-Kubrā)
- Lesser Saintship (al-Wilāyat al-Sughrā)
- Super-Arcane (Akhfā)
- Arcane (Khafī)
- Mystery (Sirr)
- Spirit (Rūḥ)
- Heart (Qalb)
- Earth
- Fire
- Air
- Water
- Lower Soul (Nafs)

THE WORLD OF CREATION (ĀLAM AL-KHALQ)

*Adapted from chart in MUHAMMAD DHAUQī, SIRR-I-DILBARĀN and Ahmad Sirhindī's MAKTĪBĀT-I- Imām Rabbānī.
the work *al-Taqhimāt al-Iltāhiyya*. The names which he gave to some of these centres initially appear to be new to the tradition but have some precedent in certain works of Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 1240), whose thought was a great influence on Shāh Wali Allāh. A major purpose of Wali Allāh in elaborating this highest level is to explain in more detail the paths of Prophetic Inheritance (*wirātha al-nubuwwa*) and that of saintship (wilāyāt) which could be followed by individual spiritual aspirants. Since I have discussed his descriptions of these higher centres and the level of the Concealed *Latāʾīf* at length in another paper, I will rather focus on aspects of the development of Shāh Wali Allāh’s model related to its structure, and to his understanding of the relationship between the intermediate level of centres associated with individual “psychological” aspects of the person and the physical or material level of being, at the level below this.

Comparing the additions of Shāh Wali Allāh with the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya model (see diagrams 1 and 2), one observes that Shāh Wali Allāh has expanded the two levels of *latāʾīf* to three by adding to the second level the *latifa* Intelligence (*ʿaql*) as well as by adding the new centres in the topmost circle. The new arrangement of centres in the middle circle is certainly not random. This middle circle represents for Shāh Wali Allāh the arena of voluntary self-transformation, the place where the divine and the earthly components of the person are mediated through the development and ultimate transcendence of individuality. Another way of expressing this is that the middle circle for Shāh Wali Allāh is understood as the dimension of the human person which is in tension between the higher angelic forces inherent in his nature pulling from above and the material or animalistic component of his being attracting him from below. This tension between the angelic and animalistic forces figures prominently in Shāh Wali Allāh’s theory of virtue and the attainment of happiness as expounded in his master work, *Hujiyat Allāh al-Baligha* (diag. at p. 142).

Examining the diagram of this middle circle, we find that at the top Shāh Wali Allāh has placed the Rational Soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiga*) which according to his thought is the source of the individuality of the person while it transmits the characteristics of the form of the human species (*ṣūra nauʿīyya*). At the bottom of the circle is the Lower Soul (*nafs*) or Mould (*qālab*). Each of these two centres thus marks a transition point—the Rational Soul between the human and the higher or
THE SUBTLE SPIRITUAL CENTERS (LATĀ'IF)
SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH’S MODEL

THE DIVINE ESSENCE (AL-DHĀT)

THE GREATER I-NESS ABSOLUTE SELFHOOD (ANĀNIYYA KUBRĀ)

THE ARCANE (KHAFĪ)

THE SUPER ARCANE (AKHFĀ)

MYSTERY (SIRR)

THE SPIRIT (RŪH)

INTELLIGENCE (CAQL)

HEART (QALB)

LOWER SOUL

AIR

WATER

FIRE

EARTH

*1. Based on diagram in al-Tafhimāt al-Ilāhiyya, 1. p. 244
THE INTERMEDIATE LEVEL OF THE MANIFEST (BĀRIZA) LATĀ'IF

angelic realm, and the Lower Soul between the psychological (nafṣānī) and the physical or natural (ṭabīṭ) functions of personhood.

Following Shāh Wali Allāh’s descriptions of the centres around the circumference of the middle circle, we understand that we are to perceive it as composed of two sides or paths, the left and the right. On our left is placed the centre Intelligence (‘aql) and above it the Mystery (sirr). On the right side is found the Heart (qalb) and above it the Spirit (rūḥ). The centres Spirit, Heart, and Mystery were commonly held by the Ṣūfīs to represent important spiritual aspects of a person. The Intelligence (‘aql) and the Heart were naturally known to the medical tradition as well as to Ṣūfī religious psychology, but the Ṣufis did not totally identify their latā‘īf with corresponding physical organs, although there was believed to be some relationship, at least at the lower levels.

Shāh Wali Allāh specifies that the Mystery (sirr) represents a higher aspect or refinement of the Intelligence, just as the Spirit (rūḥ) represents a further refinement of the qualities of the Heart (qalb) lāṭīfa. Therefore his arrangement of the latā‘īf around the circle
symbolizes both this affinity and hierarchy among the centres while at the same time it indicates the paths which an aspirant might follow in order to progress upward towards the Divine Essence.

A further indication of the interrelationships among the *l̲āṭā'īf* may be derived from Wali Allāh's explanation of the way in which spiritual progress occurs. At the initial stages of the path what is required of a person is the harmonization of the physical components controlled through the lower centres so that the person's temperament becomes balanced according to his individual constitution. This state is effected through developing cooperation among the three major centres; the Heart, Intelligence, and Lower Soul (*nafs*), corresponding in medical theory or *ilm al-ṭibb* to the organs heart, brain, and liver, and in Hellenized Šūfī psychology to emotions, rationality, and physical desires. Therefore it can be seen that his theory assumes that psychological states affect physical aspects of the person. According to Shah Wali Allāh, the process of harmonization is required for every human individual in order to ensure physical health, happiness, the cultivation of virtue, and ultimate salvation. His theory of religion affirms that the ideal formula to effect this balancing of the human temperament has been provided in the form of the Divine laws sent by God through the prophets and culminating in the revelation of the Divine Law (*sharī'ī a*) of Islam.¹⁰

Beyond the basic harmonizing of the functions of the lower centres according to the requirements of the human species, the cultivation of the higher *l̲āṭā'īf* is not expected of every person and therefore, according to Wali Allāh, the *l̲āṭā'īf* Spirit, Mystery, and those at higher levels were not mentioned in the *sharī'ī a* (although many Šūfīs find allusions to them in the language of the Qurʾān).

In order to cultivate and refine these higher *l̲āṭā'īf* additional spiritual practices are required. For example, according to Wali Allāh the way to purify the Spirit (*rūḥ*) is the observance of purity at all times, the recitation of the Qurʾān, mystical exercises, and cultivating an intuitive relationship with the souls of the saints. The Mystery (*sīr̲r*), on the other hand, is awakened by contemplating the Divine attributes, meditating on God's Divine Names, and the silent and wordless forms of the remembrance of God (*dhikr*).¹² It is thus possible to see how Wali Allāh associates practices of a more "mental" or "intellectual" nature with the Mystery, a fact consistent with his depicting it as the higher level of the Intelligence (*aql) *l̲āṭīfa*. 
Once having understood how Shāh Walī Allāh arranged his spiritual centres at the middle level, I was curious to determine whether his conceptualizing of the position of the centres at the physical or lowest level would correspond in some way to this order. The diagram in the most recent edition of *al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* did not provide any assistance here, for the lowest centres were not included there, although other texts made it clear that the lowest circle contained the Lower Soul (nafs) or Mould (gālab) and the four elements. The four elements in traditional Islamic medical science and cosmology are of course fire, air, earth and water, and anyone versed in *ilm al-ṭibb* or the Islamic version of Astrology as Shāh Walī Allāh certainly was, would likely have the traditional associations concerning the inter-relationships and symbolic correspondences of these elements. With this as a starting assumption, I felt fairly confident in assuming that the centre representing the element “air” in the lowest circle would correspond to the position of the *latīfa* “Intelligence” above, since this element is traditionally associated with mental activity, the planet Mercury, and so on. In fact, the need to incorporate a centre which would both correspond to the element air and make his model symmetrical may have influenced Shāh Walī Allāh to insert this new *latīfa*, in the model. In identifying the centres associated with the other three elements I was less certain at first, but I speculated that the element “fire” would be positioned in some correspondence with the element “air” as it is generally considered to be compatible in its nature to “air”. That “fire” should be associated by Walī Allāh with the Mystery, indicating that it was perceived as higher or more subtle than “air”, also seemed likely following the traditional arrangement of the elements. This correspondence left the elements “earth” and “water” to the side of the diagram associated with the Heart and Spirit *latāʾif* and here I guessed that “earth,” since it is lower in the ranking of the elements, would correspond to the Heart and “water” to the Spirit.

I was interested to find this supposed arrangement of the elements confirmed in some of the unpublished letters of Shāh Walī Allāh, *Maktūbāt-i-Dīnī va ʿIlmi*, in the collection being prepared for publication by the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, Tughlaqabad, New Delhi (India). For example, in the letter no. 51 addressed to his disciple Muḥammad ʿĀshiq, Shāh Walī Allāh mentions that he associates the Heart *latīfa* with the element “earth”. A further indication is that in letter no. 88, written to Bābā ʿUṭhīmān, Shāh Walī Allāh describes qualities
which Śūfis develop through the cultivation of the *laṭifah* “Spirit” (*rūḥ*) and says that they can be symbolized by the “water of life” (*āb-i-ḥayāt*). He then explains that the cultivation of the Mystery (*sirr*) leads to a state best compared to the “Fire of Sinai” (*ātish-i Ṭūr*), referring to the fire of Sinai which appeared to Moses (*Qurān* 28:29). These allusions confirm that the arrangement of the four elements in the lowest circle was carefully worked out to be in correspondence to the attributes of the centres of the middle circle which were associated with aspects of individual psychology.

It was also interesting to observe that Shāh Wali Allāh had deliberately departed here from the traditional Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya arrangement of the elements as he noted in the same letter to his chief disciple Muḥammad Āshiq:

The secret of the Shaikhṣ of Sirhind (i.e., the Naqshbandiyya-Mujaddidiyya Shaikhṣ) saying that after traversing the *laṭā’if* the matter falls in with the origins of the subtle spiritual centres, is that they interpreted [this] by associating the Spirit (*rūḥ*) with “air”, the Mystery (*sirr*) with “water”, the Arcane *khāfī* with “fire”, and the Super-Arcane (*akhfā*) with “earth”.

Wali Allāh then explains in this letter that there is a parallelism of all things in the universe, which is reflected in the arrangement of the inner and outer *laṭā’if* as well as the order of the bodily humours and the elements. He refers to the fact that in his system the Heart (*qalb*) is to be associated with the element “earth”. This could be an allusion to the fact that in Sirhindi’s system there is no element left for the Heart to be associated with, a problem resolved in Wali Allāh’s arrangement which maintains the parallel structure at all of the levels.16

Although this discovery concerns a relatively minor detail of Shāh Wali Allāh’s thought, it confirms the consistent efforts of our author to maintain a pattern of symbolic interrelationships among the components of both the spiritual and the physical worlds.

This consistent patterning is seen in other dimensions of Shāh Wali Allāh’s works; for example, his theory of religious revelation,17 and his idea that societies develop through progressive stages of refinement and complexity (*irtifāqāt*). Ultimately he sees the entire universe unfolding and even evolving according to this pattern, that at the lowest level the parts of systems need to resolve their internal conflicts so that
the system may fulfil its original potential as bestowed by the individual and specific forms. Once this harmony and fulfilment have been achieved, the system is able to expand to a higher and more complex order of being as determined by a new form. This expansion is, of course, not evolutionary in a materialistic sense, since it depends on Divine mercy and generosity as a source of the new form as well as on individual effort.

Shāh Wali Allāh, in his system of the subtle spiritual centres as in many other facets of his thought, maintains the understanding that conflict at the lowest levels of being must be overcome in order for progress to occur. Progress, whether spiritual or material, is inspired and guided by the one great purpose of the entire universe which he calls *al-maṣlaḥa al-kulliyya*. This understanding, which is in effect a reconciliation of a theory based on inherent conflict with a monistic one in which movement is directed by one great force, reflects Wali Allāh’s intellectual mediation between Shaikh Sirhindī’s doctrine of the Unity of Experience (*wahdat al-shuhūd*), a doctrine positing an ongoing struggle among conflicting forces, and the monistic ontology of the Unity of Existence (*wahdat al-wujūd*) held by Ibn al-ʿArabi and his followers.¹⁸

It may be observed that Shāh Wali Allāh’s depiction of the *laṭāʿif* also offers a resolution of the dispute among certain advocates of Sirhindī’s doctrine, which ranked the station of prophecy highest, and certain followers of the “wujūdi” school, who contended that saintship (wilāyat) was the highest station. His portrayal of the structure of the person and the mystical path toward the Divine Essence as having both a left and a right side is graphic evidence of this mediating position. According to the design of this model, no longer does prophecy have to be positioned at a rank above saintship, or vice versa. Instead, both the right and the left paths, respectively the path of prophetic inheritance (*wirāṭḥa al-nubūwā*) and the path of the greater saintship (*al-wilāyat al-kubrā*), need to be traversed by the Sūfī who wishes to attain the ultimate goal in the most comprehensive way.¹⁹
SHĀH WALĪ ALLĀH’S DEPICTION OF SPIRITUAL PATHS IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE HIGHEST LEVEL OF THE HIDDEN LATĀ'İF

DIVINE ESSENCE (AL-DHĀT)

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE (HĀJAR-I BAHT)

PATH OF THE PROPHETIC INHERITANCE (WIRĀTHA AL-NUBUWWAT)

THE LIGHT OF THE HOLY (NUR AL-QUDS)

THE ARCANE (KHAFĪ)

THE SUPER-ARCANE (AKHFA)

THE GREATER SELFHOOD (ANĀNIYYA KUBRĀ)

PATH OF THE GREATER SAINTSHIP (AL-WILĀYAT AL-KUBRĀ)
1. I would like to express my appreciation to the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies, New Delhi (India) for allowing a microfilm of these letters to be made for the Persian collection of the Regenstein Library, University of Chicago, and to Dr. Paul Sprachman for acquiring it for the library.


5. For this, see Fazlur Rahman, *The Philosophy of Mulla Ṣadr* (State University of New York, 1975), pp. 180-185.

this. The idea that the practices enjoined by the *shari'a* balance the physical elements of the person is also found in Sirhindi, *Maktūbāt*, vol. 2, pt. 6, pp. 160-163.


13 *Al-Tafqīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 1, p. 244.

14 In *Altāf al-Quds* and *Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* this arrangement is mentioned.

15 In his autobiography "Al-Juz' al-Latīf," medicine or *ṭibb* is mentioned as one of the subjects which he studied; in particular he cites the work *Mūjaz al-Qanūn*, an abridgement by Ibn al-Nafis (d. 1288) of Ibn Sinā'a *Qanūn*. There are many indications in *al-Tafhīmāt* that Wali Allāh was familiar with astrology or *ʿilm al-nujūm*.

16 In letter no. 51 of the Indian Institute of Islamic Studies collection "Maktūbāt-Dīnī va-ʿIlmi".

17 See M.K. Hermansen, "Shāh Wali Allāh of Delhi's Hujjat Allāh al-Baligha" for a discussion of this theory.

18 He wrote his famous letter, "Maktūb-i-Madani", reprinted in *Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 2, pp. 261-284, in an effort to demonstrate that there was no essential difference between *waḥdat al-nuḥūd* and *waḥdat al-ṣuhūd*.

19 The assumption that the spiritual aspirant must traverse both paths to reach the Divine Essence explains Shāh Wali Allāh's positioning of the Arcane Centre (*khafī*) above the Super Arcane (*aḥfūf*), as he observes in his *Al-Tafhīmāt al-Ilāhiyya* 1, p. 245:

If you say: "If the Super Arcane is lower than the rest of the Concealed *Lātāʾīf* then why is it called the Super-Arcane?"

I reply that it is called the Super-Arcane because the comprehensive general knowledge which is obtained from [completing] the two courses [the left and the right paths towards the Divine Essence] together, is only achieved after the two courses. The traveller on the mystic path arrives only after having completed both of them, and therefore it [the *Akhfūf*—since it is at the foot of each path] is called the Super-Arcane.

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