

Manners & Their Meaning

*Actions are lifeless forms,
but the presence of an inner reality of sincerity within them is what endows them with life-giving Spirit.*
Ibn Ata'illah

The teachings of the Qur'an; the sunna, which is the example of Muhammad; and the example of all of the other Prophets, form the basis for traditional Sufi adab — beautiful action, the form of behavior which creates the conditions in which the attributes of God may be clearly reflected.

Ibn 'Arabi stated that Sufism is "to assume God's character traits as one's own," and it has been said that all of Sufism is, in fact, adab. The primary meaning of the Arabic root of adab is "to invite," or "to gather together for a banquet." Hospitality is regarded as sacred duty in Islam, and this linguistic connection illuminates the significance with which the relationship of guest and host, and the sharing of sustenance, are regarded. Accordingly, early treatises on adab address such matters in great detail, as do the customs of many contemporary Sufi orders.

The 10th century traveler Ibn al-Husayn al-Sulami set forth many details of the adab of table manners and hospitality in his Futuwah. He advised, "Give elaborate feasts, be gracious when entertaining, and be generous to your guests." A host is instructed to serve all the food he has to his brother, even if this means only a drop of water. Sulami suggests that if a guest's gift of food in turn is offered to the guest by the host, one "must be extremely careful of your manners," and cites Muhammad's advice, "Don't count your friend's mouthfuls."

Around the year 1050 CE, Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri summarized the prevailing wisdom on adab in his Kashf-al-Mahjub, the first Persian treatise on Sufism. Dervishes residing in community were exhorted to greet travelers with joy and respect, treat them as honored guests, and freely set before them whatever food they had.

They must not inquire whence he has come or whither he is going or what is his name, but must deem that he has come from God and is going to God and that his name is "servant of God." They should not eat alone, but should unselfishly share their food with one another; and when seated at table they should not be silent, and should begin by saying "Bismillah"; and they should not put anything down or lift anything up in such a way as to offend their comrades, and they should dip the first mouthful in salt, and should deal fairly by their friend.

Sahl ibn Abdallah al-Tustari was asked about the meaning of the verse, "Verily God enjoins justice and beneficence" (16:92). He replied, "Justice consists in dealing fairly with one's friend in regard to a morsel of food, and beneficence consists in deeming him to have a better claim to that morsel than yourself."

Furthermore, the Sufi should eat with his right hand and should look only at his own morsel, and while eating he should not drink unless he is extremely thirsty, and if he drinks he should drink only as much as will moisten his liver. He should not eat large mouthfuls, and should chew his food well and not make haste; otherwise he will be acting contrary to the custom of the Apostle (peace and blessings upon him), and will probably suffer from indigestion. When he has finished eating, he should give praise to God and wash his hands.

Hujwiri

The 12th century scholar Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi also wrote a treatise on adab which included instructions for conduct at meals and with guests, many of which echo those of Hujwiri. First in importance was that one should eat in company whenever possible, whether informally with companions, graciously with guests, or generously with the poor, and always with impeccable courtesy. One should eat only when hungry, and stop before becoming full.

Suhrawardi also advised that travelers not carry food on their journeys. To do so constitutes an exercise of the quality of tawakkul — wholehearted faith in Allah as Provider, humility in the face of that fact, and acceptance of what is given — into a context in which one is most vulnerable. Hungry strangers who consciously leave the provisioning to God expose and confront their dependence on Divine grace, generosity and protection. Consequently, the conditions are created for others to serve as vehicles of those qualities.

According to Suhrawardi, the Sufi must greet and honor all guests, and share with them whatever pure food or drink is available without fuss or ceremony. The guest, in turn, should sit where placed by the host, and express appreciation. After Muhammad's example, every meal should begin with:

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim

In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate and Merciful

He instructed that only the Shaikh (the spiritual leader) should invite those at the table to begin the meal; and no one, especially the leader of the group, should leave the table as long as anyone else is eating. This recalls the custom of Muhammad, who was always the last person at the table to finish lest any companion be embarrassed to eat more than him. No fault should be found with the food, nor should it be praised; in fact, too much discussion of food is considered equal to gluttony. In eating, one should only satisfy one's hunger, and better with a small amount of pure food than a feast of impure food. Following the sunna, only three fingers of the right hand should be used for eating; small bites should be taken and the food chewed well. When sharing a common dish one should eat from the nearest side, not only out of courtesy and cleanliness, but because according to the counsel of Muhammad, baraka, the blessing power of God, descends first into the center of the dish. A meal should end with prayer, and might be followed by conversation, after which the guest should not leave until receiving permission from the host. In emulation of Muhammad's practice, the host should accompany the guest to the door.

Detail from carpet depicting Nur 'Ali Shah, 19th century shaikh of the Nimatullahi Order. [Click for larger image.](#)

The Nimatullahi Order's rules of the adab of service at dervish meetings offer a model of behavior relevant to life in the world at large. Those having the responsibility of service are chosen according to their inner potential, sincerity, good manners and gentle behavior; they are advised to treat everyone equally, regardless of wealth, parentage or social position. Neither must there be any discrimination on the basis of age; children are to be shown the same respect as adults. In distributing food and drink, the "dervishes of service" must "consider the circle" — the ancient Sufi custom of passing in a circular fashion, from right to left.

Although Hujwiri counseled dervishes to carry on pleasant conversations with guests, in some Sufi communities meals traditionally have been taken in silence.

Food is consumed to have the power to obey God. Hence that person who is engaged in eating with such an intention in mind is performing the essential act of obedience. And if someone is performing an

act of obedience, for instance, saying prayers, how can he respond to the greeting of peace?

Abu'l Qasim Nawrabadi

*When a Dervish is eating his food, it is his worship,
and during the worship neither should he be saluted
nor should he salute.*

Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki

*How could a morsel be digested without sight of Him,
without the view of His roses and His rose-garden?*

Rumi

In many tariqats, the table is the setting for spiritual discourse: the Shaikh is the first to eat or speak, and participants pay close attention to exchanges with the Shaikh. Extraneous conversation is kept restrained and at low volume. The principle here is that without attention there can be no attunement, and without attunement there is no way to receive spiritual teaching and nourishment. Given the right circumstances, both food and exchange with one's spiritual teacher and companions — in words and in silence — may be transformed into energy, to be expended in conscious service.

Sufi teachings point to the potential nourishment in a meal beyond the bulk and chemical composition of the food. The senses are nourished by impressions arising from attention to the appearance, texture, flavor and aroma of food. Even subtler is the nourishment activated when food is prepared and eaten in a state of presence and love. And our hearts are nourished in loving exchange with our teachers and companions. Such nourishment feeds all centers of a human being.

The Mevlevi Order was founded by Sultan Veled, the son of Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi. According to its custom, if a dervish wanted a drink of water during a meal, he would motion to the water server, the saki. All present would stop eating so that none would eat more than another. The saki would pour the water, kiss the glass, and offer it to the thirsty one. In silence the dervish would kiss the glass and drink. When the glass was empty, the Shaikh would say "Ashk olsun," then everyone would continue to eat.

Mevlana Jelaluddin Rumi. [Click for larger image.](#)

This phrase, "Ashk olsun" — "May it become love" — is a declaration of a dervish's best vision of the fate of any sustenance: that it be transformed within the human heart into conscious awareness of the Divine love that provided it in the first place.

Without Love, how could there be existence?

By what power could bread have entered you and become you?

Without your love and appetite, how could the bread
have encountered the spirit of life?

Love transforms dead bread into spirit:

it makes mortal spirit everlasting.

Rumi

Illustration from *The Epistles of the Sincere Brethren: Authors and Attendants*. Baghdad, 686/1287.

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The sunna and adab contain the highest levels of metaphor. For instance, on the custom of eating with three fingers, the Ikhwan al-Safa wrote:

One of the practices of the prophetic norm and the beautiful acts of right conduct is to use three fingers to partake of food, which is the nourishment of the body. In this custom the one who established the

norm for souls seems to have made an allusion, admonishing and inciting them to seek knowledge from three routes. For knowledge is the nourishment of the soul, just as food is the nourishment of the body. And the states of the soul are similar to the states of the body, because the connection between the two is so strong.

One of the routes by which the soul partakes of knowledge is the faculty of reflection, through which the soul perceives the intelligible existents. By this route the prophets take revelation from the angels. The second route is hearing, by which the soul receives the meanings of words and the tidings of absent things denoted by the sounds. The last is the route of sight, by which souls witness existent things that are present.

Ikhwan al-Safa

On one level, the use of the right hand for eating is a hygienic measure born of cultural necessity; it also carries the symbolism of right and left. The auspicious right hand is associated with goodness, happiness, cleanliness, purity, blessedness, and consciousness of God; the left is associated with the opposite qualities. This imagery suggests the choices that can be made by creatures with will and intelligence. In like manner, the image of the descent of baraka into the middle of a serving dish contains a reminder that the dimensionless center of the human being is where the presence of God is felt. The sunna of accepting invitations acknowledges the value placed on community, sharing all levels of sustenance; in this context, refusal of an invitation implies alienation from community. The act of sharing food promotes remembrance of unity, and the interrelatedness of all creation.