

A Brief Life Sketch of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani al-Ghawth al-Azam

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Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani ^{qs} was a descendent of Imam Hasan ^{as} on his father's side and Imam Husayn ^{as} on his mother's. His ancestors had settled in the region of Gilan (arabacized into Jilan), south of the Caspian Sea in present day Iran, hence the *nisba* of al-Jilani in his name.

His father's name was Musa Abu Salih ^{rh} and was given the sobriquet of Jangi Dost because of his penchant for Jihad. His mother also was a pious lady whose name was Fatima Umm al-Kahyr ^{rh}. Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} was born to them in 470 A.H. (1078 of the Christian Era, henceforth, C.E.). According to many traditions, he came into this world on the eve of Ramadan.

Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} lost his father while he was only a few years old. His maternal grandfather, Abd Allah Sumai ^{rh} took over his education and had him enrolled in the local school. By the age of twelve, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} had acquired all the knowledge available locally and was ready to venture out of his hometown to quench his ever increasing thirst for religious learning. These were Abbasid times and no city in the Islamic realms could compete with Baghdad as the center of all sorts of learning. It acted as a magnet for students and teacher alike from all over the Islamic world. The Shaykh ^{qs} also took permission from his mother and headed for Baghdad. He arrived in the city in 488 A.H. (1095C.E.) when he was eighteen years old.

At that time, Shaykh Hammad al-Dabbas ^{qs} was well known in Baghdad for his knowledge and piety. Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} decided to become his student and was well received by his teacher who would hold classes in his shop where he sold syrup. Shaykh Hammad ^{qs} was also his first Sufi shaykh and the first to give him *baya*. After completing his studies with him, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} joined the *madrasa* of Shaykh al-Mubarak al-Mukharrimi ^{qs} called Madrasa Bab al-Azj. Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} completed his study of the sciences of *Fiqh*, *Usul*, *Hadith* and *Adab* with many prominent *ulama* and at the same time completed his spiritual training under the guidance of Shaykh al-Mukharrimi ^{qs} who became his second Sufi shaykh. Since Shaykh Mukharrimi ^{qs} was a Hanbali, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} also specialized in that particular school of *Fiqh*. He graduated from the *madrasa* after eight years in 496 A.H. (1103 C.E.) at the age of twenty-six.

During his studies, the Shaykh ^{qs} suffered severe financial difficulties but nevertheless persevered. At the same time, he continuously engaged in ascetic practices required for his spiritual training. These practices became even more rigorous after his graduation when he left Baghdad for the surrounding wilderness to subdue and tame his ego. He remained in spiritual

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retreat for many years finally returning to Baghdad in success by God's Grace. On his arrival, his former teacher, Shaykh al-Mukharrimi ^{q̄s}, appointed him a lecturer in his *madrasa*, and, shortly before his death in 513 A.H. (1119 C.E.), made him in charge of it.

Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{q̄s} remained in charge of the *madrasa* to the end of his life. Soon, the fame of his knowledge, piety and lofty spiritual status spread far and wide. His sermons, especially, drew large crowds and were instrumental in making many people repent and turn towards God. They have survived in a collection titled, *Futuh al-ghayb*, and continue to guide regular Muslims and Sufis, novices and adepts alike, towards God and a deeper understanding of His religion. The Shaykh ^{q̄s} devoted the rest of his life until his death in 561 A.H. (1166 C.E.) to reforming the hearts and minds of people. For this purpose he composed many books and tracts, like the *Ghuniyat al-Talibin*, that are still popular with people serious about Islam and Sufism. At the same time, he expressed his spiritual insights in poetry which is preserve in a *divan* and a number of *qasidas*.

The Shaykh ^{q̄s} remained unmarried throughout his student days as well as the time he spent in ascetic practices. On his return to Baghdad, he eventually married four wives and had forty-nine children. Twenty-seven of them were sons many of whom became *ulama* in their own right.

He was in the company of his sons, when on the 11th of Rabi al-Thani in 561 A.H. (1166 C.E.), Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{q̄s} passed onto the next world at the age of ninety-one lunar years. The news of his death spread through Baghdad like wildfire and resulted in one of the biggest funerals ever witnessed in that city. He was buried in his *madrasa* where his final resting place is still a focal point of devotion for thousands every year.

Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani ^{q̄s} is unique among the *awliya* ^{q̄s} for the universal reverence and esteem he is held in in the Muslim world. From Malacca to Morocco and from Siberia to the Sahel, he is the most widely recognized sage after the prominent *sahaba* ^{ra}. He is not only venerated by ordinary, not so learned Muslims but also the *ulama*, and above all, Sufis of all sorts of affiliation. Nearly all great shaykhs ^{q̄s} after his time have made it a point of acknowledging his spiritual greatness and his guidance and aid to them on the Path. Hence, one of his titles is *al-Ghawth al-Azam* (The Greatest Succor). His teachings and practices have influenced every major *tariqa*.

It is significant that his praise unites people who are generally in disagreement, even conflict, with each other. The best example is Shaykh Ibn al-Arabi ^{q̄s}, who received a *khirqā* from Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{q̄s} with the greatest reverence and declared that he had not realized the full significance of the *khirqā* until he had received one from the Shaykh ^{q̄s}, and his arch critic,

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Shaykh Ibn Taymiya ^{rh}, who refers to Shaykh Abd al-Qadir ^{qs} in his works as *shaykhuna* (our *shaykh*), which has led some to speculate that he might have had a Qadiri affiliation himself.

It is not hard to figure out why this should be so. One of the Shaykh's ^{qs} titles is *Muhyi al-Din* (Reviver of Religion). In many ways he continued and perfected Imam al-Ghazali's ^{qs} project of integrating the various aspects of Islam into an organic whole while also protecting the faith from corruption. His Sufism is so firmly integrated with the Noble *Sharia* that it has led some orientalist, like J. Spencer Trimingham, whose book, *The Sufi Orders in Islam*, is considered a basic read in Western Academia, to speculate that he was not a Sufi at all, that a cult of devotion grew up around him after his death, and that the practices of the Qadiri are a patchwork of borrowings from other *tariqas*. This is despite the overwhelming testimony of the grandest masters of the Path from all *tariqas* to the contrary. It seems the armchair academician has a perspective unique to him which does not need the corroboration of "native subjects".

At the same time, the Shaykh ^{qs} stole the wind out of sectarian conflict by declaring himself to be inferior to the mote of dust snorted out by the horse ridden by Hadrat Muawiya ^{rh}. Given the Shaykh's ^{qs} noble lineage, his stature as an *alim* and Sufi, this is no mean statement. As is typical of the Shaykh's ^{qs} pithy, polyvalent sayings, it is also an indication of the Shaykh's ^{qs} humility and a hint at the spiritual hierarchy of Sufism.

The stories told about the Shaykh's ^{qs} miraculous spiritual powers are innumerable. However, as the Shaykh ^{qs} himself along with other luminaries of the Sufi firmament have consistently said, the spiritual rank of a *wali* is not contingent upon miracles but on how much knowledge of Himself God bestows upon him. That, in turn, enables the *wali* to follow the *sunna* of the prophets ^{as}, and teach people and bring them to God. It is only in this context that Shaykh Abd al-Qadir's ^{qs} stature can be truly appreciated. He was not only acknowledged as the *qutb* of his own age in his own lifetime. More than that, he has been acknowledged as a permanent *qutb* since then by *shaykh* after *shaykh*. He is the trainer and guide of *awliya* ^{qs} to higher spiritual realms along with being a source of guidance, Divine Mercy and the spiritual *baraka* of our lord, master and beloved Muhammad al-Mustafa ^{saw} for all Muslims. He was simply stating a spiritual fact when he said:

Afalat shumus al-awwalin wa shamsuna

Abadan ala falak al-ula la taghrabu

The sun's of those who came before set, but my sun

Will shine in the highest sphere until the end of time and not set.

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To learn more about Shaykh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani ^{QS} and his path, please contact Shaykh Amin ^{DB} at contactus@sulook.org.

Wa akhir dawana an al-hamd lillah Rabb al-Alamin wa al-salat wa al-salam wa al-barakat ala al-anbiya wa al-mursalin wa al-malaika wa al-muqarrabin khususan ala sayyidihim shams al-risala wa al-nubuwwa al-wilaya sayyidina wa habibina wa mawlana wa hadina wa shafina Muhammad al-Mustafa wa ala alihi wa azwajih wa sahibi wa ala sulha wa shuhada wa awliya ummatihi wa ala sair al-muslimin ya Rabbana ya Karim innaka Hamidun Majidun amin.