

Compassion (*Shafaqa*) toward Creation as a Sufi Principle in Protecting the Environment (Living Beings)*

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Abstract

This study explores the nature of compassion in Sufism and its influence on environmental protection, particularly concerning living beings. Lexically, *shafaqa* denotes mercy, tenderness, and concern about harm befalling others out of kindness. In Sufi terminology, it signifies a heartfelt gentleness toward others, accompanied by goodwill for all of God's creation and a willingness to endure hardships for their well-being. Compassion is a central ethical and spiritual principle in Sufi teachings, extensively emphasized in primary sources. It has even been described as the moral trait of prophets and divine saints. Attaining elevated spiritual ranks is fundamentally contingent upon compassion for creation. Compassion is actively present across the *sharī'a* (sacred law), *ṭarīqa* (spiritual path), and *ḥaqīqa* (ultimate reality), profoundly affecting spiritual seekers. Through self-purification from selfish desires and the cultivation of praiseworthy traits, one transcends self-centeredness and perceives all beings as part of oneself. Consequently, compassion, rooted in intuitive and mystical insight, allows the seeker to witness all existence in unity, and like the Divine, the seeker interacts with creation through kindness and care, protecting all beings. This perspective can inspire society toward constructive engagement with the environment and contribute to healing damaged ecosystems while addressing environmental crises. This qualitative study employs content analysis using the Clarke and Brown method, examining textual references related to compassion from classical Islamic mystical works spanning the 3rd to 11th centuries AH.

Keywords: compassion, environment, Sufism, living beings, environmental crisis

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1. Introduction

The environment encompasses all spaces where life exists. It consists of external physical factors and living organisms interacting, influencing growth, development, and behavior. The environmental crisis is a significant challenge in the modern world, characterized by pollution, drought, desertification, deforestation, and more. These crises stem from modernist ideologies, excessive consumerism, and exploitative practices aimed at artificial comfort, ignoring that humanity's welfare depends on the well-being of nature and all living beings. Thus, nature, all creatures, and human societies are intrinsically interconnected.

Prioritizing scientific advancement while neglecting the spiritual dimension of humanity and nature has led people to manipulate the environment recklessly, endangering their own existence. The Quran explicitly warns against such self-destructive behavior: "Do not, with your own hands, cast yourselves into ruin" (Quran, 2:195).¹

Religion can play a pivotal role in addressing environmental crises, serving as both an inherent human need and a divine model for guidance. However, a misinterpretation of sacred texts—such as Genesis 28:1 and Quran 45:13—has led to the belief that since humans are the noblest of creation and divinely authorized to rule over the world, they have unrestricted authority to exploit it. Yet, a careful examination of these verses and their commentaries reveals otherwise. As Maimonides clarifies in *Dalālat al-Ḥā'irīn*, dominion is neither a command nor an obligation but merely a description of human nature (n.d., 3, 13, 509; Seidenberg 2017).

Many verses in the Quran emphasize God's ownership of existence and His creation, such as *mālik al-mulk* (Quran, 3:26). The human being is not the owner of the world. The phrase *lakum* in the Quran, often paired with certain verbs, might imply possession. For example, the phrase *khalaqa lakum* (He created *for you*), appearing first in Quran (2:29), has been interpreted by exegetes as not indicating ownership (*lām tamlik*) nor exclusive allocation (*iḍāfat takhṣīs*), but rather as a statement of explanation. This verse emphasizes God's power and blessings upon humanity, urging gratitude, awareness, and reflection (Shawarani 1396 SH, 31). Therefore, a careful and nuanced interpretation of scriptural verses is essential, challenging the anthropocentric readings often attributed to Abrahamic religions.

Traditional creation narratives indicate that the natural world was created prior to humanity. This notion is supported by both the Bible and the Quran. Emphasizing the precedence of natural order over human existence highlights the profound impact such perspectives can have in addressing environmental crises.

In an era where environmental crises threaten human existence and the entire ecosystem, every field of knowledge can offer practical and theoretical-epistemic

solutions to improve current conditions. Islamic mysticism, rooted in the esoteric teachings of the Quran, prophetic traditions, and the conduct of the Imams (PBUH), aims at an experiential understanding of divine names and attributes, existence, and humanity. Within a worldview based on *wahdat al-wujūd* (the unity of existence), all creation is seen as God's manifestation—which makes it sacred—with humanity included in this manifestation. This worldview transcends individual perspectives, asserting that creation is inseparable from humanity's destiny, as every human action leaves a lasting impact on the planet. Moreover, a person's perception of creation directly shapes their behavior toward beings.

Mystics believe that creation originates from divine love (*ḥubb*), as it is God's love that brings forth manifestation and existence. God interacts with creation through this same love and compassion. Therefore, believers are encouraged to engage with existence compassionately. Such a perspective can counter the exploitative approach toward nature and serve as a foundation for developing environmental ethics.

Among Sufis, *shafaqa*, or compassion, for creation is so vital that it is regarded as a condition of faith and submission to God (Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 3: 1108; Makkī 1424 AH, 239; al-Sulamī 1424 AH, 211, 281). A spiritual seeker lacking this trait cannot attain the ranks of the gnostics and those who have achieved spiritual unity. Therefore, a closer examination of the principles and ethics of Islamic mysticism reveals insights into environmental ethics, offering spiritual strategies for protecting the natural world and mitigating ecological crises. Thus, Islamic mysticism can contribute alongside other sciences to address contemporary environmental challenges.

The core question of this research is the following. What is *shafaqa*, or compassion, in Sufism, and how does it influence environmental protection, particularly concerning living beings?

This qualitative research applies a content analysis approach using the Clarke and Brown method. Based on a review of accessible mystical texts, no independent research has yet explored compassion in Islamic mysticism in Persian or other languages to the best of the author's knowledge. However, some articles have indirectly addressed this topic. For instance, Shawarani, in his article "The Value of Animals in Sufi Thought," examines the intrinsic value of animals from an environmental perspective, emphasizing kindness and compassion toward living beings and this behavior's spiritual impact on seekers of divine proximity. Similarly, Panahi, in her paper "A Study of Human-Animal Relations in Sufi Practical Mysticism," explores the idea that humans are not superior to animals, presenting stories of Sufis' compassion toward animals. The distinction of the

present study lies in its focused analysis of compassion and its environmental implications.

2. Lexical Analysis

The term *shafaqa* (compassion) is derived from the Arabic root verb *shafaqa*, meaning mercy, tenderness, and fear of harm befalling someone out of kindness, empathy, and goodwill (Zamakhshari n.d., 533). A *shafīq* is described as one who is eager to ensure the well-being of others (Farāhīdī 1409 AH, 5: 44; Ibn Manẓūr 1414 AH, 10: 180). The concept of *shafaqa* is characterized by gentleness and softness, as opposed to harshness and severity. This is why the delicate twilight light after sunset is called *shafaq*. Spiritually, it represents a subtle light filled with divine grace within the material world, serving as a symbol of mercy and guidance, preventing destruction (Muṣṭafawī 1385 SH, 6: 87).

Though the word *shafaqa* itself does not appear in the Quran, its derivatives occur eight times as a subject participle (*mushfiq*) and twice as a verb (*'ashfaqa*).

Numerous narrations emphasize compassion toward creation. The most notable narration from the Prophet Muḥammad (PBHU) near the end of his life highlights two principles: "Reverence for God's command and compassion for His creation." This teaching has been described as the essence of religion (Nasā'ī 1420 AH, 7: 65). Another prophetic narration states: "Whoever shows no mercy will receive no mercy" (Bukhārī 1410 AH, 9: 218), emphasizing kindness toward all beings. Imam 'Alī (PBUH) also expressed this in his counsel to Kumayl ibn Ziyād, referring to *shafaqa* as an indicator of a believer's dignity (Ṭabarī Āmulī 1383 AH, 2: 26). Compassion, according to Imam 'Alī, should extend even to sinners and oppressors, as one of the signs of noble character is mercy towards all human beings (Warrām b. Abī Firās 1410 AH, 1: 99).

This prophetic tradition on compassion has been extensively cited in Sufi sources. In some texts, it is used without direct attribution to the Prophet. For instance, Abu Bakr Warrāq (d. 280 AH) stated, I studied the four revealed scriptures and found their message summarized in two principles: "reverence for God's command and compassion for His creation." He further noted that honoring God is the foundation of faith, while kindness toward creation reflects moral integrity (Nasafī 1385 SH, 204). Warrāq also taught that God desires two qualities in His servants: reverence for His command and compassion for His creation ('Attār 1386 SH, 469). Qushayrī (d. 465 AH) described these principles as the pinnacle of knowledge (Qushayrī 1422 AH, 92). Similarly, 'Abd al-Qādir Gīlānī (d. 561 AH) emphasized that all virtue lies in honoring divine commands and showing compassion to creation, stating that anyone who neglects these principles is

distant from God (1426 AH, 106). Khwāja ‘Abd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 487 AH) described human salvation as dependent on practicing these two principles:

If fortune favors you,
 You should show compassion to creation,
 You should revere the divine command,
 And you shall find the keys to the eight gates [of paradise.]
 (Anṣārī 1377 SH, 2: 591)

Khalq: The term *khalq* in Arabic as an infinitive has two meanings: (1) bringing something into existence without prior precedent and (2) measuring or determining (Azharī, 1421 AH, 7: 16; Ibn Manẓūr, 1414 AH, 10: 85). As past participle, it signifies the created and creation (Rāghib Iṣfahānī 1374 SH, 1: 635), encompassing humans, animals, inanimate objects, and the entire cosmos. *Khalq* as used in this paper signifies this latter meaning. The passive participle meaning is also used in the Quran, such as in the Quran (30:30): “mankind—there is no altering the creation of God” and “This is the creation of God” (Quran, 31:11).

Based on the lexical meanings of *shafaqa* and *khalq*, compassion towards creation in this study, as viewed from a Sufi perspective, refers to tenderness, love, and kindness toward all beings—both sentient and non-sentient—and the sincere desire for their well-being.

3. Compassion toward Creation in Sufism

In Sufi thought, *shafaqa* is defined as the softness of heart toward others, accompanied by the sincere intention for their well-being, extending to all of God’s creation (Daylamī 1428 AH, 269). It serves as both a foundational ethical principle and a spiritual practice among Sufis, shaping their worldview and approach to creation. This perspective encompasses not only humans but all living beings.

Sufis consider *shafaqa* a pillar of ethical conduct. Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297 AH) identified four core virtues: generosity, sociability, sincere counsel, and compassion (Suhrawardī 1427 AH, 1: 253; ‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH, 389). Moreover, *shafaqa* is seen as a defining quality of chivalry. ‘Abd Allāh Sajzī (d. 271 AH) described chivalry as perceiving the faults in oneself while recognizing the virtues in others and showing compassion to all beings, whether virtuous or sinful (Abū Nu‘aym Iṣfahānī, n.d., 10: 351). Similarly, Abū al-Ḥasan Kharaqānī (d. 425 AH) noted: “Spiritual chivalry is an ocean fed by three springs: generosity, compassion, and reliance on God alone.” (‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH, 606)

At first glance, Sufi texts might seem to imply that *shafaqa* refers only to compassion for fellow humans. However, a closer examination reveals that Sufi compassion encompasses all beings. Even if interpreted narrowly as compassion for humanity, it would still profoundly impact environmental consciousness, as

empathy toward people cannot be separated from care for their surroundings. One who feels no compassion for humans cannot be expected to show concern for the natural world.

Sufis have described *shafaqa* for creation as a defining moral trait of prophets and saints (Khargūshī 1427 AH, 43; Nasafī 1386 SH, 296). Numerous references to the Prophet Muḥammad's (PBUH) compassion can be found in Sufi texts, reflecting profound insights. It is said that God sent the Prophet with mercy and compassion for creation (Qushayrī 1981, 636). In their commentary on the Quranic verse "And truly thou art of an exalted character" (Quran, 68:4), Sufis explain that the great character of Muḥammad refers to his complete sincerity toward God internally and his boundless kindness and compassion toward creation externally, with neither aspect distracting him from the other (Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 3: 1204).

Furthermore, Sufis consider the Prophet's compassion for both the common and the elite as one of the reasons for his superiority over previous prophets. They believe that the one who demonstrates greater compassion toward creation is more virtuous. It is narrated that God addressed the Prophet saying: "O Aḥmad! Do you know why I have favored you over the previous prophets?" The Prophet replied: "No." God responded: "I favored you for four qualities: the strength of your certainty, your noble character, generosity, and compassion for all creation, both common and elite" (Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 4: 1728; Nasafī/Hamadānī 1378 SH, 108).

Since Sufis believe that Sufism is the complete imitation of the Prophet's tradition, compassion for creation has been described as both a principle of Sufism and a defining ethical quality inherited from the Prophet (Sulamī 1414 AH, 211; Sha'rānī, n.d., 2, 146; Sha'rānī 1425 AH, 91). Abū Naṣr Sarrāj al-Ṭūsī (d. 387 AH) summarized the Sufi path in three principles: Obedience to God's command, solidarity with the poor, and compassion for creation (1914, 176). Similarly, Abū al-Qāsim Ḥakīm Samarqandī (d. 342 AH) stated: The mystic interacts with God through reverence, with creation through compassion, and with the body through opposition to its desires (Uzjandī 1383 SH, 69).

Abū Sa'īd Abū al-Khayr (d. 440 AH) also emphasized this principle, stating: "This group (the Sufis) struggles against their own egos while showing compassion to Allah, the High's servants". Even the wearing of the *khirqā* (Sufi robe) has been described as a symbol of readiness for mercy and compassion toward creation (Bākharzī 1383 SH, 33). Attaining the status of a shaykh or spiritual guide in Sufism is also contingent on embodying *shafaqa* (Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 1: 109).

For this reason, Sufi masters frequently advised their disciples on the importance of compassion. For instance, it is narrated from Abū al-Ḥasan

Kharaqānī: “Preserve four things: avoiding prohibitions, performing communal prayers, practicing generosity, and showing compassion for God’s creation” (‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH, 584). Ibn ‘Arabī further emphasized: You must show compassion for all of God’s servants and all animals (n.d., 4: 484).

This principle was so vital among Sufis that they were willing to sacrifice their own lives to ensure the comfort of others, enduring hardships and suffering so that creation could experience peace (Kulābādhī 1933, 145, 149; Muḥammad ibn Munawwar 1386 SH, 1: 227; Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 3: 1025; ‘Aṭṭār 1386, 591).

Ibn ‘Arabī (d. 637 AH) went so far as to argue that compassion for creation holds greater importance than zeal for God. He narrated a story of the Prophet Dāwūd (David) to illustrate this: Dāwūd sought to build the Bayt al-Muqadas (Jerusalem Temple) but each time he completed its construction, it would collapse. When he complained to God, he was told: “My house cannot be built by hands that have shed blood.” Dāwūd replied: “But was it not in Your cause?” God responded: “Yes, but were they not My servants?” Dāwūd then asked that the temple be built by one from his own lineage, to which God replied: “Your son Sulaymān will build it.” The aim of this story is to consider the human constitution because it is better to be preserved rather than being devastated, as God has established treaties and peace with the enemies to safeguard life (Ibn ‘Arabī 1370 SH, 1: 167).

People of knowledge attribute the absence of *shafaqa* to excessive attachment to the material world and surrender to base desires, which darken the heart, removing *shafaqa*, thus leading to oppression. They emphasize that one who expels the love for the material world from their heart will no longer be dominated by desires and will show mercy toward all creation. Even when encountering a dog, such a person would not withhold *shafaqa* or harm it, but rather gently pat it (Maybudī 1371 SH, 1: 266).

Based on the teachings and recommendations of Sufis, it can be concluded that the spiritual journey toward God is impossible without *shafaqa*. Abū Sa‘īd Kharrāz stated: “The signs of a sincere seeker are tenderness, compassion, mercy, generosity, and patience, to the extent that they treat their servant with such kindness that they feel safe, behave with elders as a righteous son, with children as a nurturing father, and with the people as one who shares their suffering, sympathizes with their grief, and endures their harm. This is what God desires for sincere seekers to remove the veils of duality between them and Himself. As long as the seeker maintains this attitude, God remains pleased with them” (Sarrāj Ṭūsī 1919, 267).

4. The Rationale for Sufi Compassion Toward Creation

The rationale for *shafaqa* toward creation in Sufi thought can be examined from two perspectives: epistemological and practical journeying.

In the epistemological perspective, the Sufi, due to mystical knowledge of existence, perceives the realities of creation as they truly are. This direct witnessing leads to a compassionate and loving view of all creation (‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH, 591). Abū Sa‘īd Abū al-Khayr interpreted the statement of Shiblī (d. 334 AH) that “A Sufi is not truly a Sufi until he considers all creation as his family and kin” as an expression of compassion for creation. When the Sufi directly perceives the helplessness of creation, subject to divine decree and power, their heart is filled with compassion, obliging them to carry the burdens of others (Muḥammad ibn Munawwar 1386 SH, 1: 227).

It is further stated that when a servant attains divine knowledge and becomes annihilated (*fanā’*) in the Divine, they cease to perceive creation through their own attributes but instead through divine qualities. Such a person, emptied of ego, views all beings with compassion and excuses them for their shortcomings, seeing them not through personal judgment but with the mercy of God. This person shows kindness to the poor, prays for sinners, and is gentle even with the wealthy, refraining from harshness or blame (Sulamī 1369 SH, 3: 192). Such a person, recognizing the Divine in all creation, treats the world with compassion (Mustamlī Bukhārī 1363 SH, 2: 655).

A direct outcome of mystical knowledge is the exaltation of divine majesty. Whoever truly reveres God inevitably inherits compassion for creation, willingly bearing the burdens of others (Qushayrī 1422 AH, 129). It is also said that one who realizes divine greatness perceives their own ego as insignificant, leading to humility and sincere compassion toward all beings (Uzjandī 1383 SH, 160).

As explained, knowledge of the Divine generates love for Him, a divine gift bestowed upon the servant. This love turns the seeker away from selfish desires and leads to compassion for all creation (Isfarāyīnī 1358 SH, 1: 138, 36). Bāyazīd Bastāmī stated: “The sign of one who truly loves God is that they are granted three qualities: generosity like the ocean, compassion like the sun, and humility like the earth” (Sahlagī 1383 SH, 353; ‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH., 167). Consequently, the greater one’s love for God, the greater their compassion and mercy toward creation.

‘Abd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 736 AH) described how such a person perceives all beings as their children, kin, and even as their organs (Kāshānī 1423 AH, 1: 394). This perspective might be rooted in the view of Shiblī mentioned earlier, where he stated that a Sufi regards all creation as family. Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (d. 587 AH) similarly wrote in *Bustān al-Qulūb* that one must view all creation with compassion, seeing them as brothers and children (Suhrawardī 1375 SH, 3: 400).

These teachings closely resemble the writings of Francis of Assisi (d. 1226 CE), a Christian mystic who poetically referred to all natural phenomena as his siblings (Hart 2017, 39). Due to this profound love and solidarity with all beings, he has been called the “mystic of nature.” Notably, however, Sufis articulated such views long before Francis of Assisi.

Ultimately, in Sufism, *shafaqa* is a defining trait of those who have attained mystical knowledge and divine illumination. Such a person lives in harmony with creation, views all beings with kindness, refrains from harming anyone, and avoids condemning others as misguided, seeing all as journeying toward God (Nasafī 1386 SH, 107).

From a practical perspective, *shafaqa* in Sufi thought is closely tied to practical spiritual journeying, disciplines, and mystical states and stations. Compassion is considered an essential requirement for spiritual progression. A seeker must establish peace with all of creation, refrain from harming anyone in word or deed, and never withhold compassion (Nasafī 1386 SH, 144).

To purify and master the ego, Sufis practice spiritual disciplines such as fasting, seclusion, silence, night vigils, and *dhikr* (remembrance of God). Among these, fasting and *dhikr* are directly linked with the development of compassion. Mystics believe that satiety hardens the heart and diminishes compassion, as fullness can lead one to ignore the suffering of others (Ghazālī 1386 SH, 3: 184).

Dhikr, the remembrance of God, is regarded as the primary meditative tool for spiritual development. Each divine name has a unique spiritual effect on the seeker. Specifically, the consistent repetition of *al-Raʿūf* (The Compassionate) and *al-Raḥīm* (The Merciful) is said to soften the heart and cultivate compassion for creation (Būnī 1427 AH, 210).

The relationship between *shafaqa* and mystical states and stations is so profound that lacking compassion can prevent one from attaining higher spiritual ranks. Abū al-Qāsim Ḥakīm Samarqandī stated: “Whoever is granted a spiritual rank but is not given compassion and mercy will be brought down from that rank” (Uzjandī 1383 SH, 183).

Qurb (proximity to God) is among the highest mystical states and is closely tied to compassion in the experiences of Sufi masters. Bāyazīd Baṣṭāmī declared: The closest person to God is the most compassionate toward creation (Daylamī 1428 AH, 55).

Regarding the connection between compassion and mystical stations, various views have been recorded. Some believe *shafaqa* is most closely associated with the stations of *faqr* (spiritual poverty) and *riḍā* (contentment). When a seeker reaches the true essence of *faqr*, the robe of *riḍā* is bestowed upon them. Upon attaining contentment, their compassion for creation increases, leading them to

conceal the faults of others, pray for them, and show mercy (Sulamī 1363 SH, 3: 41).

Others link *shafaqa* to the station of *tawakkul* (trust in God), considering compassion for animals and service to humanity as early manifestations of this state (Maybudī 1371 SH, 4: 325). Some also argue that compassion is directly tied to virtuous character and the final stages of the spiritual path, ultimately culminating in *fanā' fī Allāh* (annihilation in God) (Isfarāyīnī 1358 SH, 1: 8).

5. Compassion and the Divine Friends

As previously mentioned, *shafaqa* is a defining trait of the *awliyā' Allāh* (divine friends) who have reached the highest mystical stations. Such individuals, having realized the value of creation and witnessed the Divine presence within it, treat all beings with reverence. Their compassion, a reflection of divine grace and mercy, leads God to grant them the privilege of intercession on the Day of Judgment (Rūzbihān Baqlī 1426 AH, 58-59).

Regarding compassion as a trait of the *awliyā'*, numerous statements have been recorded from Sufī masters. When asked how to identify the true *awliyā'*, 'Abd Allāh ibn Salām al-Baṣrī replied: They are recognized by their gentle speech, good character, humility, fresh countenance, tolerance, and complete compassion for all creation (Sulamī 1424 AH, 313; Nasafī/Hamadānī 1378 SH, 183).

This defining trait led the *awliyā'* to overlook the flaws of others and see them with the eyes of perfection. It is reported that when a man who had been in the company of Ibrāhīm ibn Adham was about to leave, he asked: "Do you see any faults in me?" Ibrāhīm responded: "I see no faults in you because I view you through the lens of friendship and compassion. Everything I observed was good. If you seek to know your faults, ask others" (Qushayrī 1374 SH, 418).

Moreover, the compassion of the *awliyā'* led them to constantly pray for all of creation, bearing the burdens of others with patience and kindness. Without being asked, they would supplicate for the well-being of others. They were devoted to the salvation of all beings and refrained from retaliation when wronged. They kept themselves free from resentment, abstained from the wealth of others, and severed all material expectations from people. They avoided speaking ill of others, never engaged in backbiting, and held no enmity toward anyone in this world or the hereafter (Qushayrī 1374 SH, 490).

Ibn 'Arabī, in discussing the elite *awliyā' Allāh*, described three categories of divine friends distinguished by their exceptional compassion. However, he clarified that all *awliyā'* possess compassion, but in these groups, the quality is more pronounced:

First are the Christlikes (*ʿisawiyūn*), consisting of Muslim saints whose spirituality is aligned with the characteristics of Jesus. Their qualities include effective spiritual resolve, answered prayers, and impactful speech. They are known for their mercy toward all humanity, regardless of faith or sect, speaking only words of goodness (Ibn ʿArabī n.d., 1: 226).

Second are the Men of Tenderness and Kindness (*Rijāl al-Ḥanān wa-l-ʿAtf*), saints showing compassion to all beings, whether believers or disbelievers, viewing creation through the lens of divine grace rather than judgment, governance, or dominion. They are incapable of viewing others except with mercy (Ibn ʿArabī n.d., 2: 12).

Third are the Compassionate Saints (*al-Mushfiqūn*), saints characterized by their fear of divine wrath and punishment; those who fear change in their ego. When God reassures them with His mercy, their kindness extends fully to creation, like prophets, marked by profound sensitivity and gentleness (Ibn ʿArabī n.d., 2: 37).

6. Compassion for Animals in Sufism

Having examined Sufi perspectives on the importance, nature, rationale, and the ranks of divine friends characterized by *shafaqa*, this final section explores the significance of compassion for animals in Sufism. This discussion highlights the importance of such compassion in achieving spiritual ranks and fostering a proper relationship with all beings. Embedded within these captivating stories are profound ecological insights, underscoring the necessity of sharing these accounts.

Sufis and the people of knowledge have consistently emphasized and practiced compassion and kindness toward animals. It has been said: “Your treatment of all animals should be based on compassion and mercy, for God has made them subservient to you. Do not burden them beyond their capacity, nor ride them arrogantly like the heedless of God and the proud” (Ibn ʿArabī 1414 AH, 116; Bākharzī 1383 SH, 107).

The spiritual significance of compassion for animals in Sufism is so profound that even the prophethood of a great messenger like Moses (PBUH) was attributed to his compassion for a sheep. Qushayrī (d. 465 AH) narrates: God revealed to Moses: Do you know why I granted you the rank of prophethood? Moses replied: O Lord, You know best. God said: Recall the day you were tending sheep, and one fled from the flock. You pursued it, and when you caught it, you gently consoled it, saying: “O poor creature, you have exhausted both yourself and me.” When I saw your compassion for this animal, I granted you prophethood (Qushayrī 1422 AH, 254).

In another account, ʿAṭṭār Nīshāpūrī described the redemptive effects of compassion, specifically the forgiveness of sins, through a story involving Sufyān

al-Thawrī (d. 161 AH): “Out of his compassion for God’s creation, Sufyān once saw a small bird caged in the market, crying and struggling. He purchased and released it. Every night, the bird came to Sufyān’s house and remained watching over him as he prayed. When Sufyān passed away, the bird threw itself upon his corpse, wailing—and people cried aloud. When they buried him, the bird threw itself upon the ground until a voice was heard from the grave: ‘God forgave Sufyān because of his compassion for creation.’ The bird then died and joined Sufyān” (‘Aṭṭār 1386 SH, 200).

Qushayrī and ‘Aṭṭār also recount the story of Abū al-Qāsim Nasrābādī (d. 367 AH), who performed forty pilgrimages without provisions. Once, in Mecca, he encountered a starving and weakened dog. Having no food himself, he asked passersby: Who will buy the reward of my forty pilgrimages for a piece of bread? A man accepted the offer and gave him bread, which Nasrābādī immediately fed to the dog (Shawarānī 1400 SH, 219). This account emphasizes that for Sufis, compassion for living beings surpasses even the most significant ritual acts, such as the *ḥajj*. Nasrābādī was willing to forfeit the spiritual merit of his pilgrimages to feed a creature, which is considered impure in Islamic law. This sentiment echoes Sa’dī’s famous verse: “The path of faith is nothing but serving creation / Not mere rosaries, prayer rugs, and cloaks” (Sa’dī 1385 SH, 330).

Another story narrated by Abū al-Ḥasan Daylamī quotes Abū ‘Abd Allāh Khafif Shīrāzī (d. 371 AH). During a time when the city’s governor ordered the killing of stray dogs, people were actively searching for and killing them. A terrified dog fled into Khafif’s mosque seeking refuge. When a man entered to kill the dog, Khafif sternly warned him: If you do not stop this cruelty, I will curse you so severely that not one of you will survive. The man, frightened, repented and became a Sufi (Shawarānī 1400 SH, 220).

Ibn ‘Arabī, in the section on *Wasaya* of the *Futūhāt al-Makkīyah*, emphasizes showing mercy and compassion to all beings, regardless of their nature. He recounts two stories illustrating the afterlife rewards of compassion. A sinful woman from the Israelites was forgiven by God after she gave water to a thirsty dog.² According to the second story, a harsh and oppressive ruler once saw a freezing dog shivering in the cold. He ordered his servants to bring the dog inside, feed it, and warm it by the fire. That night, he heard a voice in his dream saying: You were a dog, but We forgave you for your compassion toward the dog. Shortly afterwards, he died, and his funeral was attended with great honor due to this compassion (Ibn ‘Arabī, n.d., 4: 646).

Aḥmad al-Rifā‘ī³ (d. 578 AH) once encountered a maimed, hairless dog from which people recoiled in disgust. He took the dog aside, shaded it from the sun, fed it, and treated its wounds with oil until it recovered fully. When asked why he had

shown such extensive care for the dog, he replied: I feared God would question me: Was there no compassion for My creation in your heart? (Shaʿrānī, n.d., 2: 146). This story also emphasizes the importance of attending to and caring for vulnerable and injured beings, as if God's expectation from humans is to nurse and protect the weak and wounded. Otherwise, they will face divine reproach.

In another account, al-Rifāʿī demonstrated extraordinary gentleness even toward the smallest creatures. While walking under the sun, whenever a grasshopper landed on his robe seeking shade, he stood still, waiting patiently for it to leave, saying: We are its shade today (Shawarānī 1400 SH, 217).

A remarkable story is also narrated about ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Kasraqī Isfarāyinī (d. 717 AH),⁴ emphasizing the Sufi concern for preserving the natural order, even as minor as an ant's nest, and reducing the suffering of all creatures. The account goes as follows: He chose the path of detachment (*zuhd*) and vowed to live with the bare minimum from this world. He reasoned that righteous deeds require pure sustenance. Thus, he became concerned that every morsel of food might carry some doubt regarding its purity. When the time for harvesting crops arrived, he thought it best to walk the paths where people transported grain and gather the fallen wheat stalks from the ground, surviving on the little he could collect. As he wandered these paths, he would pick up each fallen stalk and place it in his basket. One day, however, he noticed that wherever a grain had fallen, a group of ants had gathered to collect their sustenance. Suddenly, he realized that his original intention had been to avoid causing hardship to others, yet now he was depriving these ants, the weakest of creatures, of their rightful share by taking the grains for himself. He was troubled, thinking, if I leave the grains, I will be deprived; if I collect them, the ants will be deprived. He resolved that from then on, each stalk he picked would be divided into two parts: one portion for the ants and the other for himself. He continued this practice despite the difficulty it caused—standing under the sun, frequently bending down, and enduring great strain to maintain fairness between himself and the ants.

One day, while struggling under this hardship, the prophetic teaching crossed his mind: "Exalt the commands of God and show compassion to God's creatures." Reflecting on this, he realized that merely dropping the wheat on the path for the ants was not true compassion, as it only caused them to venture onto the road, risking being trampled and killed by passersby. He decided it would be better to carry the wheat directly to their nests and separate the grains there to minimize their burden, which increased his own toil further while yielding even less for himself. He had to stand in the sun longer to both fulfill his needs and ensure the ants' safety.

One day, as he was rubbing the wheat stalks to separate the grains, his hand suddenly touched an ant, leaving the tiny creature disoriented, unsure of which direction to move. This deeply troubled him, and he reflected that the intense heat would likely harm the ant. He thought it best to find the ant's nest and return it to safety. However, to his surprise, although the ants' nests were usually visible, he searched the entire field that day but could not find their colony. Feeling helpless and sorrowful, he placed the ant gently in his palm, occasionally weeping for its plight. Eventually, he reasoned that the best course would be to gather a few pieces of clay from the field and create a small shaded shelter to protect the ant from the sun's scorching heat (Isfarāyīnī 1358 SH, 29-30).

These two stories emphasize the profound Sufi commitment to showing compassion even toward the smallest creatures and fulfilling their needs. They remind us that humans must feel responsible toward all living beings, no matter how tiny, and should never neglect them, even if they are mere insects.

7. Conclusion

Based on the presented accounts, *shafaqa* emerges as a fundamental spiritual and ethical principle in Sufism, manifesting across all three stages of the mystical path—*sharī'a*, *ṭarīqa*, and *ḥaqīqa*. It influences spiritual progression and shapes the Sufi's relationship with all creation. Through self-purification from selfish desires and the cultivation of virtuous traits, the Sufi transcends egoism and perceives all beings as interconnected aspects of divine creation.

This mystical perception fosters a compassionate engagement with the world, where existence is not viewed as mere objects of utility but as reflections of divine reality. Just as God nurtures His creation with mercy, the Sufi feels a profound sense of responsibility toward all beings. As shown in the Sufi interactions with animals, they extend their care even to the smallest creatures, refraining from harming them and actively seeking their well-being.

When dominated by base desires, humanity tends to exploit nature for selfish gain without regard for collective welfare. However, by promoting the Sufi ethos—where ethics and spirituality intertwine—society can develop a more holistic and respectful view of existence. Such an approach can inspire greater environmental awareness and serve as a spiritual response to modern ecological crises.

Ultimately, Islamic mysticism does not adopt an anthropocentric worldview but recognizes the intrinsic value of all creation. Humanity, capable of embodying divine attributes and becoming an image of God, holds the moral responsibility to protect and care for the entire cosmos.

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Notes

1. All Quranic references in this paper are based on the translation by Nasr et al (2015); however, to avoid redundancy, the citation of “Nasr et al.’s translation” will be omitted.
2. The story narrated by Ibn ʿArabī is derived from a prophetic tradition (see Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj 1412 AH/1991, 4:1761).
3. The founder of the Rifaʿī order.
4. He was one of the masters of the Kubrawiyya order and the spiritual guide of Shaykh ʿAlāʾ al-Dawla Simnānī (d. 736 AH/1336 CE).