I ask the man
who has almost singlehandedly reawakened Western interest in the ancient tradition of Sufism whether Sufis follow a special diet.

"Three hours of talking with Shah and a generous sample of his writing should have taught me that Sufis concern themselves with internal matters, not external ones, and that a prime Sufi objective is to rid people of just the kind of preconceived notions and limited thinking I had just displayed. I should also know that ill-informed questions make Shah's beard bristle.

"A Sufi lifestyle, is it?" he asks, spacing the words out evenly for emphasis. "No, my friend, not a bit of it. That's what people crave. That's what they demand. Recently another man came to interview me, and his first question was, 'What do Sufis eat? You've vegetarians, of course.' No, I said. 'You amaze me!' he said.

'I said to him. 'Now if I can be of any use to you, write that down and see what it means. What it means is that you have been able to elicit from me a reaction which helps you to describe yourself. You amaze me.' Why do I amaze you? I amaze because you think that all metaphysicians must be vegetarians. Does that tell you anything about me? No, it tells you things about yourself! Now when are you going to get out of that, and learn things about yourself, and not think that you’re learning things about other people?”

Shah leans forward, gesturing with the knife and fork.

“We are not totemists who eat brown rice and consult the Ching. That is not the Sufi at all, my friend. We have other things to do than have a lifestyle. We are getting on with our thing. And our thing does not impose on us the sort of restrictions which other people use as a substitute for getting on with their thing. You can either do something, or you can pretend to be doing something.

"Western society seems to have exhausted all its investigative potential. It is largely composed of cut-de-sac. One cut-de-sac is marked Lifestyle; one is marked Vegetarianism, and so on.

People want to know about the Sufis in terms of what limitations they observe. 'What do you eat for breakfast?' ‘How many pairs of socks do you wear?’ ‘What is the relevance of such questions?’ Why don't they ask something about what I am doing? One of our traditional functions has been to point out the limitations other people have been putting on themselves, not to impose limitations on other people. That's what the gurus do. We seek to expand, increase vision, deepen perception. You don't live by decreasing these qualities. 'That's why you don't find any lifestyle with us, brother. There's no eating of brown rice, and no mattering of Sanskrit mantras in our way.”

Over the past 15 years, Sayyed ibn Shah, 50, the grand sheik of the Sufis and a linear descendent of the prophet Muhammad, has had myriad opportunities to learn how little the West knows about Sufism—and how much it seems to know. Since his book The Sufis was published in 1963, the lean, intense, Afghan-born prince has been propelled into international celebrity, sought as an oracle by all over the world. Twenty more books have followed the first, and all have been bought up eagerly; Sufi “study circles” have proliferated (often without Shah's blessing) across the United States and Europe; courses in Sufism are the “in” thing at colleges and universities; Sufi theories of learning have influenced educational institutions everywhere. Shah himself has won a host of literary prizes, and recently won the subject of a festschrift, a collection of published commentaries by 24 renowned scholars discussing his work—an honor usually reserved for a professor emeritus of 70 who has been teaching his scholarly vocation for 50 years. One small sample of Shah's impact can be seen in his recent appearance at a U.S. seminar sponsored by the Institute for the Study of Human Knowledge. Twelve hundred persons turned out to hear him, at $60 a pop.

Ironically, the “product” Shah is “peddling” to use his term—is anything but new: The Sufis are often called “Muslim mystics,” but their roots go much deeper than Islam. In that crucible of the world’s great religions, the Middle East, Sufi influence has been traced back to the second century a.c. and is said to have crystallized in the traditions of Christianity and Judaism with the followers of Mohammed. In the golden days of the caliphate, from A.D. 600 to 1000, many of the world’s greatest writers and thinkers were Sufis. They included Omar Khayyam and Sufi, considered one of the titans of world literature, long before Darwin, and Oviedo and Darwin, Sufis theorized that time and space were identical and that humans had descended from lower animals. One of the West’s own great minds was a Sufi. The Franciscan Roger Bacon, considered the originator of modern scientific thought, studied with the Sufis in Saracen Spain. It was for learning their “black arts” that he ran afoul of ecclesiastical authority.

Explaining Sufism to a word-oriented, linear-thinking Westerner is difficult; even for an articulate and insightful man such as Shah. "He tastes not, knows not," he says, quoting Jalal ad-Din Rumi. Although there are said to be five million Sufis, mostly affiliated with established sects, Shah says that Sufism is "not a religion but a body of knowledge; the sects represent a "deterritorialization" or "cultural elaboration of the original internal teaching.” Sufism has no rituals, no holy city and no ecclesiastical hierarchy. Although Shah carries the title grand sheik, all Sufis are considered equal. Poet Robert Graves, a Shah admirer, compares him to a "tengueman," which Graves defines as an old army term for the soldier who stood alone on a company on the parade ground and served as the exemplar in arms drill. Sufis do not even call themselves Sufis, which is a nickname akin to Quakers. They use the terms We or Our people.

Genuine Sufism is inward, concern-
"If you really want to see Shah's beard bristle, suggest that Sufism is part of the yoga-and-transcendental-meditation craze."
for the next paperback, or reading to answer questions in an examination, or to torture your friends with a few gimmicks, like "You have an Oedipus complex" or "That's a defense mechanism."

"The potential is there," he continued. "There's an old Sufi story that's relevant to that. An old traditional Sufi used to dress his disciples in patchwork cloaks and have them carry a beggar's bowl and repeat certain formulas in order to concentrate their minds. He recommended that they eat mulberries off a certain tree."

What would you do under those circumstances? And he said, "Ah, well, if I were under those circumstances, I would have to get myself a totally different kind of disciple."

"The challenge now is embodied in the Sufi tradition that you must teach people in the way that they can learn. The West has the requirement to learn, but nontraditional approaches—that is, nonoriental approaches—must be made."

"You have to come to certain conclusions in order to do anything at all. For example, say that you—or the community at large, or Western society—concludes that contemporary physics shows that it is unlikely or impossible that one will be able to exceed a certain velocity of travel in space, so that our galaxy is closed to us. And as we want to go farther there must be some other way discovered in order to slip through the imprisonment of these dimensions of time and space."

"That's what I'm interested in doing in the West," he concluded. "Or rather, in the modern Western culture that now covers so much of the world that people of my generation in the Middle East are in fact often indistinguishable from Europeans."

According to Shah, he had dabbled in writing ever since his youth and, in fact, had produced a widely acclaimed book, *Destination Mecca*, in 1957; but the idea of a book on the Sufis did not take flower until he was past 40. Graves was one of those who encouraged him to "write for the natural Sufis everywhere," but, Shah says modestly, "I did not yet feel I had the proper literary skills." In addition, several other developments were necessary before the West was ready for a book on Eastern mysticism. The East had to live down the Rudyard Kipling view of mystics as freaky savages who slept on nails and charmedcobras; the West had to accept that human beings were conditioned into limited ways of thinking that obscured their humanity within, rather than creatures of free will. Shah places the Korean War as a landmark. Discovering that American flyers could be "conditioned in reverse" by those captors, American social scientists were forced to acknowledge and to study the whole conditioning process. This development, Shah believes, not only explains B.F. Skinner but the revivification of Pavlov. "If I had discussed how man has been conditioned away from his origins before 1950," Shah says, "I would simply have been put into the same box with Pavlov."

A more recent impetus was given Sufism by Ornstein's work into the bilateral specialization of the brain. For
the first time, science supported the Sufi view that learning could be achieved both sequentially and holistically.

"After Ornstein's work, we were able to introduce what we were saying in a framework not available before because there was no scientific word for it," Shah says. "Previously we had to say that our way was not scientific, but artistic—and those words were much too loaded. Now we can talk about the left brain and the right brain and it is respectable, in the sense that people will listen to it.

"It also helps us to explain by analogies derived from Ornstein's work what happens to human thinking systems once rooted in human beings and the human community and how our way differs from—and resembles—other ways of thinking. It can be put down almost diagrammatically, and it does help a person looking into it to understand whatever is this man talking about? Where does he place himself or what he is saying in the pattern of human thought?"

When Shah began to write, he reached back into his childhood and brought forth literally hundreds of simple folktales he had learned from servants, from village storytellers, from Persian literature and "just out of the air." (In fact, they are so commonplace that one Turkish publisher refused to publish one of Shah's collections, declaring, "It is unbelievable to me that anyone could make a book of nothing more than he could collect from the lips of peasants while touring the villages of Anatolia.") Some witty, some epigrammatic, some pointed, the now-famous tales are interspersed in Shah's books with his own reflections and gathered into anthologies of their own. Many of them concern Mulla (Master) Nasrudin, a kind of Middle Eastern Everyman who is sometimes court jester, sometimes crackpot-barrel philosopher, sometimes village sage and sometimes buffoon. He combines native shrewdness and insight in a way that helps him see to the heart of a situation that his more analytical "better" cannot. He also illustrates

Other ways of thinking.

"Yes," Nasrudin asked. "Yes."

"And nails?"

"Yes."

"And dye?"

"Yes."

"Then why don't you make yourself a pair of boots?"

Once Nasrudin was called upon to preach a sermon. From the pulpit, he asked the congregation, "Do you know what I am going to preach about?"

"No," they replied.

"In that case," he said, "it would take too long to explain." And he went home.

Next day he ascended the pulpit and asked the same question.

"Yes," the people said this time, determined to put him on the spot.

"In that case," said Nasrudin, "there is no need for me to say more." And he went home.

Yet again the following day he put the same question, "Do you know what I am going to preach about?"

But now the congregation was ready to corner him. "Some of us do and some of us don't," they answered.

"In that case," said Nasrudin, "let those who know tell those who don't."

Although each of these tales has a punchline, Shah explained, it also contains a teaching moral and can be examined on many levels for illumination of human behavior. Nasrudin's sermon, for example, depicts the Sufi belief that there can be no teaching to those completely ignorant, none to those who profess to know all the answers and that the best teaching method is when one who has learned by experience teaches another.

At right, Shah and his daughter studying Persian books. Below, performing the duties of country squire, Shah oversees the gardener's work on the hot house.
"Some witty, some pointed, the now-famous Sufi tales are interspersed in Shah's books with his own reflections."

Shah considers the tales an ideal way to communicate with the West. "One way we use them is as a sort of text," he said. "For instance, we often use the old Sufi tale of the sands. A little river has to cross a desert, you see, and it runs into the sand. It finds it's becoming a marsh. So the wind says to it, 'Come with me and I will carry you over the desert.' But the little river says, 'No, no, I can't. I'll lose my identity! I refuse to be turned into water vapor!' So the wind says, 'Well, all right. But look at you. You've become a marsh. You have to decide whether you wish to become a marsh or become water vapor.' So after a great deal of consideration the river finally yields up to the wind. 'Well, all right. But look at you. You're going to stagnate or putrefy. Do you want to communicate with the West? And I'll carry you over the sand.' And the little river says, 'The wind says, 'Come with me and I will carry you over the desert.' But the little river says, 'No, no, I can't. I'll lose my identity! I refuse to be turned into water vapor!'" So the wind says, "Well, all right. But look at you. You've become a marsh. You have to decide whether you wish to become a marsh or become water vapor." And so after a great deal of consideration, the river finally yields up to the wind. "Well, all right. But look at you. You're going to stagnate or putrefy. Do you want to communicate with the West? And I'll carry you over the sand." And the little river says, "The wind says, 'Well, all right. But look at you. You're going to stagnate or putrefy. Do you want to communicate with the West? And I'll carry you over the sand.'" And the little river says, "The wind says, 'Well, all right. But look at you. You're going to stagnate or putrefy. Do you want to communicate with the West? And I'll carry you over the sand.'" And the little river says, "The wind says, 'Well, all right. But look at you. You're going to stagnate or putrefy. Do you want to communicate with the West? And I'll carry you over the sand.'"

"Now when you tell this tale, some people—crude, barbaric types—see it as a sort of commercial. The guru is asking his disciples to surrender themselves to him and he will carry them safely over the marsh, which is death or the wall and said, 'Look, if I fall over that stone, I'll die. I hear from that event to look, where I'm going, that stone is my guru!' A guru is an instrument. The teaching role should be an instrument; not an opportunity for theater, not a source of self-gratification. A Sufi teacher does what he can to produce what he has to. He teaches what he can in a way students can learn it.

"We see teaching as a system of interaction. In the ordinary course of events, people persist in certain courses to achieve something. Sometimes they learn by experience that they can't do it. Say, climbing a wall. They find they can't climb the wall, so they have to adjust. Should I get a ladder? Is it worth climbing? Are there other ways to get over it by the interplay of themselves and the wall and their knowledge and experience, they learn.

"A lot of people in esoteric circles, that is, philosophical and psychological circles, ignore this fact. They tend to look for a sort of Buckminster-Fuller system, a golden key. They look at our stories, for example, for what mysterious depths and teachings are in them, or for what golden key they might be able to worry out of them. In spite of the fact that the stories themselves often illustrate the interplay between the people and the experience and the teacher or the circumstances, which is very similar to the person trying to climb the wall.

"There's an old Sufi story about a young man who set off to receive illumination from an old teacher who lived in a remote cave on the top of a mountain. He was an old man with a long white beard dressed in a white shroud, a sort of hermit. When the young man, after great privation and enormous difficulties, reached that cave and almost collapsed in front of him, he said, 'I have come all this way, and had all this trouble, and I want you to teach me illumination.' But the old man said, 'Certainly not.' The young fellow begged and begged, but the old man simply said, 'No, I can't teach you that.' Finally the old man said, 'Go.' The young man went back down the mountain track. Almost at the bottom, he looked back and saw a white figure and he realized that the old man..."
If there were one goal Shah could wish for the West, it would be education for its children on the Eastern model.

As in yoga, the Sufis believe there are internal "centers of perception" that can be utilized to help heighten the powers of the mind. There are five such "purity spots" that do not have a physical location in the sense of acupuncture points but that can be visualized for the purpose of transcending normal receptivity. Through a series of concentration exercises, a Sufi may be able to fix his attention on these spots as a means of enabling the mind to move to a higher plane. "But these cannot be attempted by anybody," Shah says. "This is the method of which there is 1 percent operation, and 99 percent preparation. It is one of the most advanced of all techniques. It could take you 30 years to get to the point where you could do it and it might be over in 36 minutes."

"It's like the simple dervish dance. It's an incredibly sophisticated instrument which can only happen at certain times and under certain circumstances. You try to make it happen, as it is sometimes done, is itself diagnostic of the inability of the person to understand its role. It disables him completely from what is happening."

For Shah, the task of bringing the Sufi message to the West remains formidable. All too many presumably intelligent persons remain defensive about their thought processes, unwilling to recognize themselves as slaves to situations that might be viewed in a different way. "All we really ask is that they detach themselves from their sophisticated analytical minds for just a second," Shah says. "We're not going to cripple them. We're not going to harm them. We just ask them to let go. After all, if you're listening to music, you're not constantly tearing it apart in your mind. It's a protected situation. The same with our materials. If you don't try to be too clever and think about what they might mean, instead of what they must mean, you can gain something from them. It's not necessary to be perfectly secure in order to learn. In fact, the 'secure' people seemed to be the most nervous."

Shah also sees a tendency for would-be Sufis in the United States and Britain to flock to the organized sects that he classifies as "deteriorations. "There seems to be such a craving for order. Discipline. Totalitarianism," he says. "It's the product of a tragic weakness. People don't have any sense of personal integrity, in the sense that they don't feel like they're people except by allegiance to some structure."

He also points the fact that many new Sufis have become fanatic about their discovery. "They turn up on my doorstep at 3 A.M. 1 say, 'The other day a woman came here and said she had been reading Jalal-ed-Din Rumi. He has led me to your door. Give me a task. Order me what you wish.' She said, 'I order you to stop reading Jalal-ed-Din Rumi at night.' She said, 'How can I throw away the very thing that brought me to your?" And I said, 'If you came on a donkey, you would leave it at the door. You wouldn't ride it into the living room. She had missed the central point of Sufism, which is to learn to tell one thing from another.'"

If there were a single goal that Shah could wish for the West, it would be better education for its children on the Eastern model. Western education, he says, is negative in that it teaches children to follow models rather than develop themselves. "Western culture is pessimistic," he said, "but it should leave the door open for possible positive action by the child. It should give him sufficient nutrition that he might develop a positive attitude toward life."

In Central Asia, children are given stories that illustrate behavior that they are to emulate. "I would never bring my children up in the Western way," says Shah, the island of the East in the world of the West. "Luckily I can insulate my children from that world. By a mixture of luck and thought, I have been able to bring their environment here. We put into their lives the intake of Central Asian stories and things derived from the Central Asian culture, they speak oriental languages, and they have grown up with every indication that they are like their cousins."

"Children—and adults—must have something to reach back into. They must have a cultural endowment. That's what we give our children and that's what our way gives to humanity."