6083 - Are the words spoken in a state of spiritual intoxication forgiven?

the question

hamza yusuf said, when speaking about the fears people have about sufism ,"the fourth reason is fear for the generality that they might be lead astray by following esoteric doctrines without upholding the letter of the law as happens to many ignorant people. so ignorant people might hear some statement which is said by a sufi and they completely misunderstand it. and abu yazid al-bistami put in imam dhahabi's tabaqat is considered a faqih (jurisprudent). imam dhahabi is considered a student of ibn taymiyya and he considers abu yazid al-bistami a reasonable and sound source of hadith. yet abu yazid al-bistami is the one who is noted for saying 'subhanee' which means 'glory to me!' this is known in the technical vocabulary of the sufis as a shatha, an ecstatic utterance. if a person says it in a state in which their self is absent they are not taken to account for it we have proof of it in sahih bukhari about a slave in the middle of a desert in which the prophet (s) says that because he finds his lost beast he shouts out in joy 'allah you are my slave and i am your lord!' the prophet explained that that slave made a mistake in his ecstatic state after finding his animal. this is someone who finds their animal, so how much greater for someone who has found his lord?! what about his state of ecstasy?
does the hadith in bukhari mean that blasphemous utterences are excused if someone is in a so called state of “spiritual intoxication”?.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Abu Yazeed al-Bistaami is Tayfoor ibn ‘Eesa, d. 261 AH.

He is not known to have studied hadeeth. Al-Dhahabi did not state that about him in his biography. Rather he mentioned something about him which could be taken as meaning that he mocked Ahl al-Hadeeth and claimed to get his knowledge directly from Allaah! That is that he said, “Who do these muhaddithoon (hadeeth scholars) think they are? If a man narrated to another man, our

heart has narrated to us from the Lord!”

Many shatahaat (ecstatic utterances) have been narrated from him, such as his saying “There is nothing inside this cloak except Allaah” and “What is the Fire? I will lean on it tomorrow and say, ‘Make me a sacrifice for its people, otherwise I am going to swallow it’” and, “What is Paradise? It is a children’s game and the desire of the people of this world.”

Because of these statements, which appear to be kufr and heresy, some of the scholars ruled that his beliefs were corrupt and that he was an innovator, but other scholars excused him.

Ibn Katheer (may Allaah have mercy on him) said: It was narrated that he uttered some weird shatahaat, for which many of the fuqaha’ and Sufis tried to find acceptable interpretations by explaining them in a far-fetched manner. Some of them said that he spoke these words in a state of oblivion. Some of the scholars labeled him an innovator and said that he was wrong, and they said that this was a major form of bid’ah, and that it was indicative of corrupt beliefs that were entrenched in his heart and manifested themselves at certain times.

Al-Badaayah wa’l-Nahaayah, 11/38

If you refer to Siyar A’laam al-Nubala’ by al-Dhahabi you will see that al-Dhahabi did not describe Abu Yazeed as a faqeeh, and he did not regard him as a source of hadeeth. Rather he narrated some good words from him, and he also narrated these shatahaat from him, and said:

There were narrated from him – i.e., from Abu Yazeed – some weird things that cannot be accepted. If it is proven that he said them, or that he said them in a state of oblivion and ecstasy, then they should be overlooked and should not be quoted as evidence, because their apparent meaning is heresy, such as “Glory be to me” and “There is nothing in this cloak except Allaah” and “What is the Fire? I will lean on it tomorrow and say, ‘Make me a sacrifice for its people, otherwise I am going to swallow it’” and, “What is Paradise? It is a children’s game and the desire of the people of this world.”

Siyar A’laam al-Nubala’, 13/88

Perhaps the reason why some of the scholars tried to make excuses for him is the fact that some good words have been narrated from him, which encourage following sharee'ah and adhering to the limits it sets, and the fact that it is narrated that when he came around (from his state of oblivion), he denied these shatahaat.

See Manhaaj al-Sunnah, 5/357; Madaarij al-Saalikeen, 2/119

It should also be noted that at best, the one who says such words may be excused for them and not blamed for them. It is not correct to take these words as a sign of being a wali ("saint") or having attained a high degree of knowledge.

Shaykh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyah] said:

Those who quote Abu Yazeed as saying that he was united with the Creator and denied that there was any difference between him and the Creator, and excuse him for that, say that he became oblivious to the extent that he said "I am the truth" and "Glory be to me" and "There is nothing in this cloak except Allaah". They say that when love overwhelms a person who is weak, he loses his mind and can only think of his beloved and is unaware of anything else; he will only think of the One Who created him and will no longer be aware of his own existence, focusing so completely on the One Whom he is remembering and not aware of what he is doing at all. When a person reaches that state, he can no longer see any distinction between the Lord and the slave, between what is enjoined and what is forbidden. This is not a state in which a person can produce knowledge or speak sense, rather the best that we can say is that he has lost control of his mental faculties by which he can distinguish between this and that, and at best he is to be excused and what he says cannot be considered to be deep insight or knowledge.

Majmoo' al-Fataawa, 8/313

Moreover, this excuse can only be accepted when a man reaches that state of oblivion involuntarily. If he does it deliberately, however, he is undoubtedly to be blamed for doing that, such as if he drinks alcohol or starts to dance in the circle of dhikr until he reaches a state of oblivion.

Shaykh al-Islam [Ibn Taymiyah] said:

But some of those who have this experience may become intoxicated and irrational when in that state of oblivion, in which state they may say things like “Glory be to me” or “There is nothing in this cloak except Allaah” and other such words that were narrated from Abu Yazeed al-Bistaami. Whatever an intoxicated person says is to be overlooked; it should not be narrated or told to others, if his intoxication has not come about through haraam means such as forbidden acts of worship or performing acts of worship in ways that are not allowed. But if the cause of intoxication is something haraam, then the intoxicated person is no longer to be excused. In this regard there is no difference between physical and spiritual intoxication.

Majmoo’ al-Fataawa, 2/461

But praising such words, or praising the words of the man who in his intense joy made a mistake and said, “O Allaah, You are my slave and I am your Lord” is a serious error. How can we praise such words when the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) has described them as a mistake, as he said, “He made a mistake because of the intensity of his joy”?

These words indicate that a person is not aware of what he is saying, or that he has completely lost control of his mental faculties. How can losing control of one's faculties be regarded as something praiseworthy or a sign of perfection or “sainthood” (wilaayah)?!

The companions of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) were the most perfect of mankind, after the Prophets, in their fear of Allaah and their hopes in Him. They attained the status of true slaves and close friends of Allaah. But it is not narrated that they uttered such words, because of their perfect wisdom and perfect following of sharee’ah. May Allaah be pleased with them all.