Those who follow the path of Sufism are sometimes called fakirs. The word fakir comes from the Arabic root “poverty.” There are many kinds of poverty. There is material poverty, the state of those who have nothing and who may have to beg to survive. Those who suffer this kind of poverty are often a burden on others and on society. There is also spiritual poverty, which is keeping our hearts empty of everything but our love of God.

**Fear of Poverty.** One old sheikh commented, "Real poverty is fear of poverty." As dervishes we should learn not to fear anything in this world, and only fear God's displeasure. If we fear poverty, we become a puppet of the world. But it is hard not to fear poverty.

One of my graduate students suffered from this fear and for her doctoral dissertation she interviewed a number of women who shared her fear of poverty. Her dissertation examined the archetype of the “bag lady,” a woman who lives on the street and carries all her possessions in bags or in a shopping cart. My student’s deepest fear was that her life might fall apart and she would end up living on the street. For most of us it is a very unrealistic fear. We have friends and family and access to all kinds of social services. But the fear is there.

Years ago, when I was a student, I had a similar fear. I feared that if I failed to do well in my classes, I would not get a degree or a good job and I would end up homeless. As a result I experienced an underlying anxiety throughout my student years.
It takes courage to say, “Whatever you wish, O Lord. Whatever I have will come and go. My life is yours to command.” That is submission. We talk about submission but it is very hard to achieve it.

**Losing our Love of Possessions.** Muzaffer Efendi used to say, “Don’t be so attached to your possessions. When you die your family will divide them up, and probably sell most of your things. They will keep only a few souvenirs to remember you by. The rest will be sold or given away.”

We are the custodians of our possessions for a limited period of time. Our possessions are not really ours. Our job is to take care of them, but they have never been ours. We are like a shepherd taking care of someone else’s flock or a nanny taking care of someone else’s children. But we forget and we come to think that we “own” things. At least the governess knows that the children she loves are not hers and they will eventually leave her. She will leave the house she is living in, and return home. The room she is in is not her room and the family she is with is not her family.

The world is just like that. We are not living in “our” room or in “our” house. Eventually we will leave it all behind and go home, to God. This is all temporary. Even our children are not ours. Like the governess, it is our job to love them and take care of them. But we don’t “own” them and eventually they will grow up and leave home. When we get too possessive with our children it doesn’t do us or them any good. No one possesses other human beings. As parents we sometimes need to be reminded that slavery is over. We have to remind ourselves to be less attached to everything around us. We are afraid of letting things go.

If we are lucky to live long enough we will become more and more like a fakir. Little by little parts of our life will go as we age. We raise our family in a nice house and eventually the children move out and the house is too big, so we move to someplace smaller. We lose our physical abilities and can no longer practice the sports we loved. Our physical energy diminishes. So does our memory. We become poorer in many different ways.

We should not try and keep accumulating more and more things. The older we get we should pay more attention to God and less attention to the world.
Contentment. Spiritual poverty is contentment, the opposite of craving. The Prophet (saws) said, “I am proud of my poverty.” He was poor in his love of the world, and rich in his love of God.

One sheikh said, “Real poverty is to be poor with God.” That is, to be content with whatever God sends us and to accept happily whatever God brings. Then it doesn’t matter what we have or don’t have.

Some dervishes have managed to live in true contentment, without craving. One man worked with his hands for a living. Every day he earned a single silver coin. He fasted every day and when he received his wages at the end of the day he gave all he earned in charity. Then, after the evening prayer he would beg for food so that he could eat. He did that for twenty years. That is the ideal of poverty. This man was not a beggar in the conventional sense. He worked and earned money every day and then he gave away everything he earned.

A young man who lived in Mecca wore rags and owned nothing. A wealthy man offered him a bag of coins and he immediately refused and said, “What are you doing? I don’t need that money. I don’t want it.” The wealthy man replied, “Then give it in charity” and the young man agreed. The sheikh who witnessed this saw the young man begging for food that evening. The sheikh was shocked. He came up to the man and asked, “My son, wouldn’t it have been better if you had kept some coins out of that bag so you wouldn’t have to beg?” The young man answered, “I didn’t know if I would live until this evening so I didn’t keep anything.” Our remembrance of death is one of the great tools to help us become less attached and less worried about this world.