The Three Perceptives

There were once three Sufis, so observant and experienced in life that they were known as The Three Perceptives. One day during their travels they encountered a camel man, who said:

‘Have you seen my camel? I have lost it.’
‘Was it blind in one eye?’ asked the first Perceptive.
‘Yes,’ said the camel driver.
‘Has it one tooth missing in front?’ asked the second Perceptive.
‘Yes, yes,’ said the camel driver.

The three Perceptives then told the man to go back along the way they had come, and that he might hope to find it. Thinking that they had seen it, the man hurried on his way. But the man did not find his camel, and he hasted to catch up with the Perceptives, hoping that they would tell him what to do. He found them that evening, at a resting-place.

‘Has your camel honey on one side and a load of corn on the other?’ asked the first Perceptive.
‘Yes,’ said the man.
‘Is there a pregnant woman mounted upon it?’ asked the second Perceptive.
‘Yes, yes,’ said the man.
‘We do not know where it is,’ said the third Perceptive.

The camel driver was now convinced that the Perceptives had stolen his camel, passenger and all, and he took them to the judge, accusing them of the theft. The Judge thought that he had made out a case, and detailed the three men in custody on suspicion of theft. A little later, the man found his camel wandering in some fields, and returning to the court, arranged for the Perceptives to be released. The judge, who had not given the men a chance to explain themselves before, asked how it was they knew so much about the camel, since they had apparently not seen it.

‘We saw the footprints of a camel on the road,’ said the first Perceptive.
‘One of the tracks was faint: it must have been lame,’ said the second Perceptive.
‘It has stripped the bushes at only one side of the road, so it must have been blind in one eye,’ said the third Perceptive.

‘The leaves were shredded, which indicated the loss of a tooth,’ continued the first Perceptive.
‘Bees and ants, on different sides of the road, were swarming over something deposited; we saw that this was honey and corn,’ said the second Perceptive.

‘We found long human hair where someone has stopped and dismounted, it was a woman’s,’ said the third Perceptive.

‘Where the person has sat down there were palm-prints, we thought from the use of the hands that the women was probably pregnant and had to stand up that way,’ said the first Perceptive.

‘Why did you not apply for your side of the case to be heard so that you could explain yourselves?’ asked the judge.

‘Because we reckoned that the camel driver would continue looking for his camel and might find it soon,’ said the first Perceptive.

‘He would feel generous in releasing us through his discovery,’ said the second Perceptive.

‘The curiosity of the Judge would prompt an enquiry,’ said the third Perceptive.

‘Discovering the truth by his own enquiries would be better for all than for us to claim that we had been impatiently handled,’ said the first Perceptive.

‘It is our experience that it is generally better for people to arrive at truth through what they take to be their own volition,’ said the second Perceptive.

‘It is time for us to move on, for there is work to be done,’ said the third Perceptive. And the Sufi thinkers went on their way. They are still to be found on the highways of the earth.